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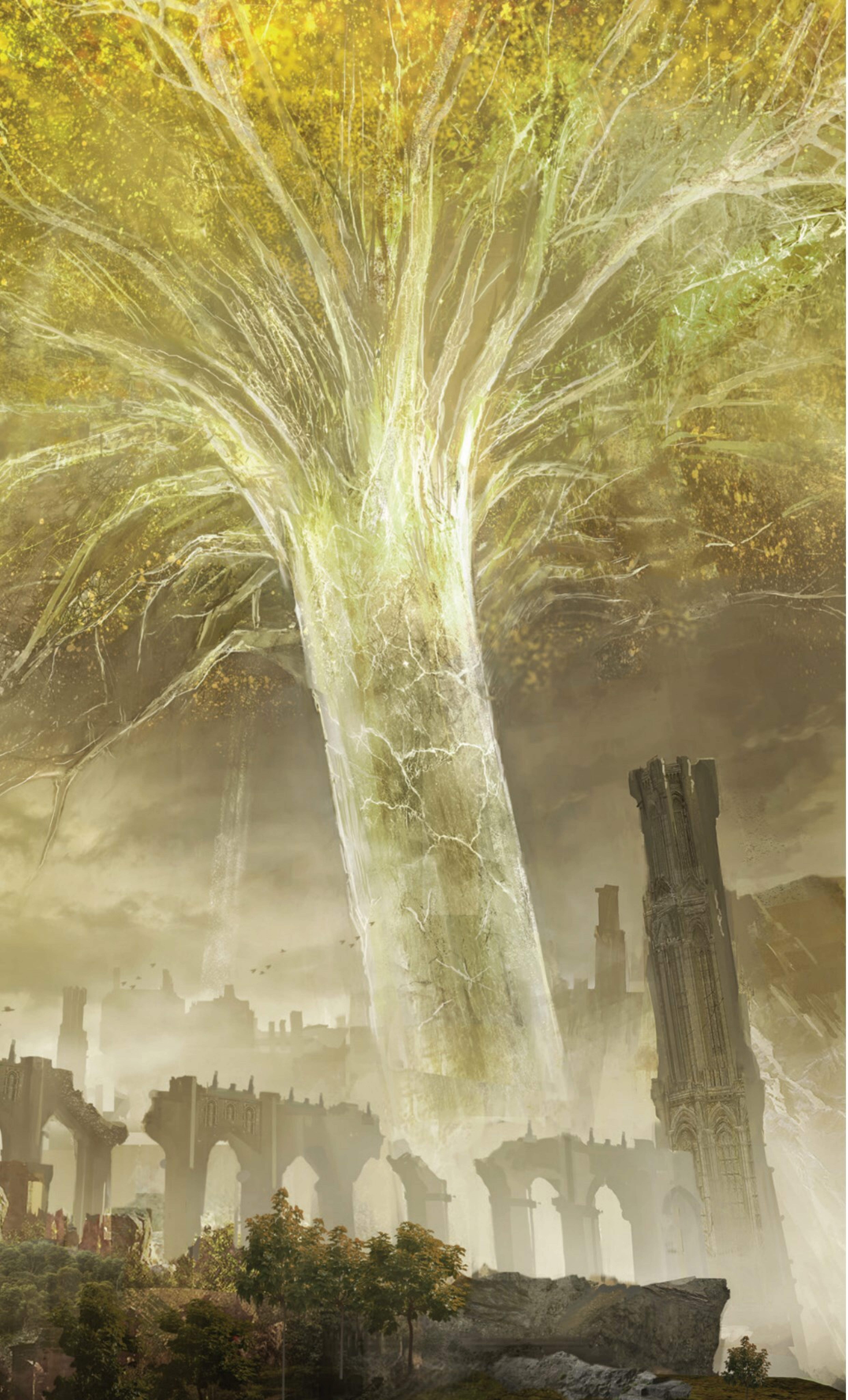

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Elden Ring concept art

Developed by From Software

Published by Bandai Namco Entertainment

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE YEAR OF VR?

WE'VE ALL BEEN WONDERING what kind of footprint VR would have in video games. When I put on an Oculus Rift for the first time, I was blown away by how immersive the experiences were. They tricked my brain into thinking I was flying and about to be squashed by giants. The potential to take games to new heights was on display, yet was kept in check by the technology – low-resolution screens, cables to fuss with, and more.

Over the last few years, it appeared VR would be for niche audiences. Valve showed us what a blockbuster experience could be like in VR through Half-Life: Alyx, but it didn't give way to other developers going all-in on VR. I think we may see that happen this year. The reasons are twofold:

Over this last holiday season, VR was one of the big sellers, so much so that the install base for Meta Quest 2 (previously called Oculus Quest 2) is now at roughly 10 million. Meta had hardware on hand when Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo didn't. Back in a Q4 2020 earnings call, Meta's CEO Mark Zuckerberg said, "The big question is what is it going to take for it to be profitable for all developers to build these large efforts for VR? To get to that level, we think that we need about 10 million people on a given platform. That's the threshold where the number of people using and buying VR content makes it sustainable and profitable for all kinds of developers."

The user base is now there for Meta, and it will soon be met with competition from Sony, which recently announced details for PlayStation 5's forthcoming PS VR2 headset. That reveal and its potential is the second big shift coming to the VR gaming scene. We still don't have a release date or price for this high-end product, but Sony recently revealed new specs: PlayStation VR2 features a 4K HDR display with a 110-degree field of view and foveated rendering on an OLED display. The resolution is 2000x2040, with framerates reaching 90/120HZ. The headset features eye-tracking and integrated cameras that pick up your movements and the direction you look. The player holds a new PS VR2 Sense controller that adds tactile elements such as feeling an on-screen character's pulse increase. Sony also announced a new Horizon game is currently in development for it.

We may not get our hands on a lot of new VR games this year, but given the momentum happening in this space, I think we should expect big announcements all year long, which will set up a prosperous future for this exciting avenue of play. I can't wait to see what games are in the works and which development studios jump on to propel the burgeoning medium forward.

ANDREW REINER
Editor-In-Chief

WHAT I'M PLAYING
Dying Light 2: Stay Human, Halo Infinite, Fortnite

WHAT I'M WATCHING
Sweet Tooth, The Book of Boba Fett

WHAT I'M READING
Department of Truth, Something is Killing the Children

MOST ANTICIPATED GAME
The sequel to Legend of Zelda: BOTW

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ELDEN RING

The individual engulfed in flames on our Elden Ring cover is the Knight of Scar. Bandai Namco says this mysterious figure is "one of the Tarnished who came closest to the Elden Lord." The rune on the back cover is significant, and is one of many players will stumble upon. Our 18-page story on Elden Ring is based on information obtained during a 10-hour hands-on play session conducted on December 8. We also talked remotely to the game's director, Hidetaka Miyazaki, for an hour on December 20. After putting the game down, *Game Informer* editor Daniel Tack walked away from his play session blown away by what he had experienced, and says it is now his most anticipated game of all time.

GAMEINFORMER

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Brian Shea

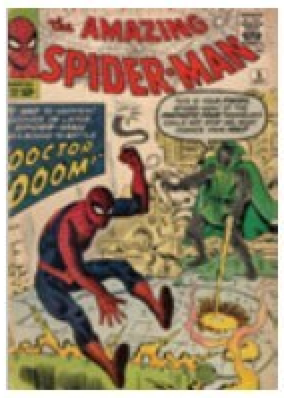
Senior Editor

Outside of games, superhero movies might be my preferred form of escapism. 2021 righted the train 2020 derailed, but I'm maybe even more excited for 2022. The new *Doctor Strange* continues the events of my favorite 2021 movie, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, before *Thor: Love and Thunder* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* pick up their respective franchises' story threads. We're also set to get *Moon Knight*, *She-Hulk*, *Secret Invasion*, and *Ms. Marvel*. Plus, *The Batman* looks downright incredible.

Marcus Stewart

Associate Editor

I'm a comic fan, and Spider-Man has been my favorite superhero since childhood. So, as a hobby, I collect issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. I own over 400 issues to date and pick up new books on a weekly basis. The oldest and possibly rarest issue I own is *ASM* #5. The goal: collect every issue ever like a nerdy Thanos, including the coveted *ASM* #1 and *Amazing Fantasy* #15. Does anyone have a few million dollars I can borrow?



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After a slew of critically acclaimed games, the developer behind Bloodborne, Dark Souls, and Sekiro is back with Elden Ring. We talked to the team at From Software and played the game to give you new details you won't find anywhere else.

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We talked to former Nintendo gameplay counselors about what it was like coaching millions of people on how to play video games, Nintendo of America's culture in the '80s and '90s, and why some people got fired for using an elevator.

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SALTY OR SWEET?
YOU DON'T NEED TO DECIDE
DON'T PICK A SIDE
THIS ONE TIME
TWIX
SALTED Caramel

*Product illustrated to show salted caramel experience
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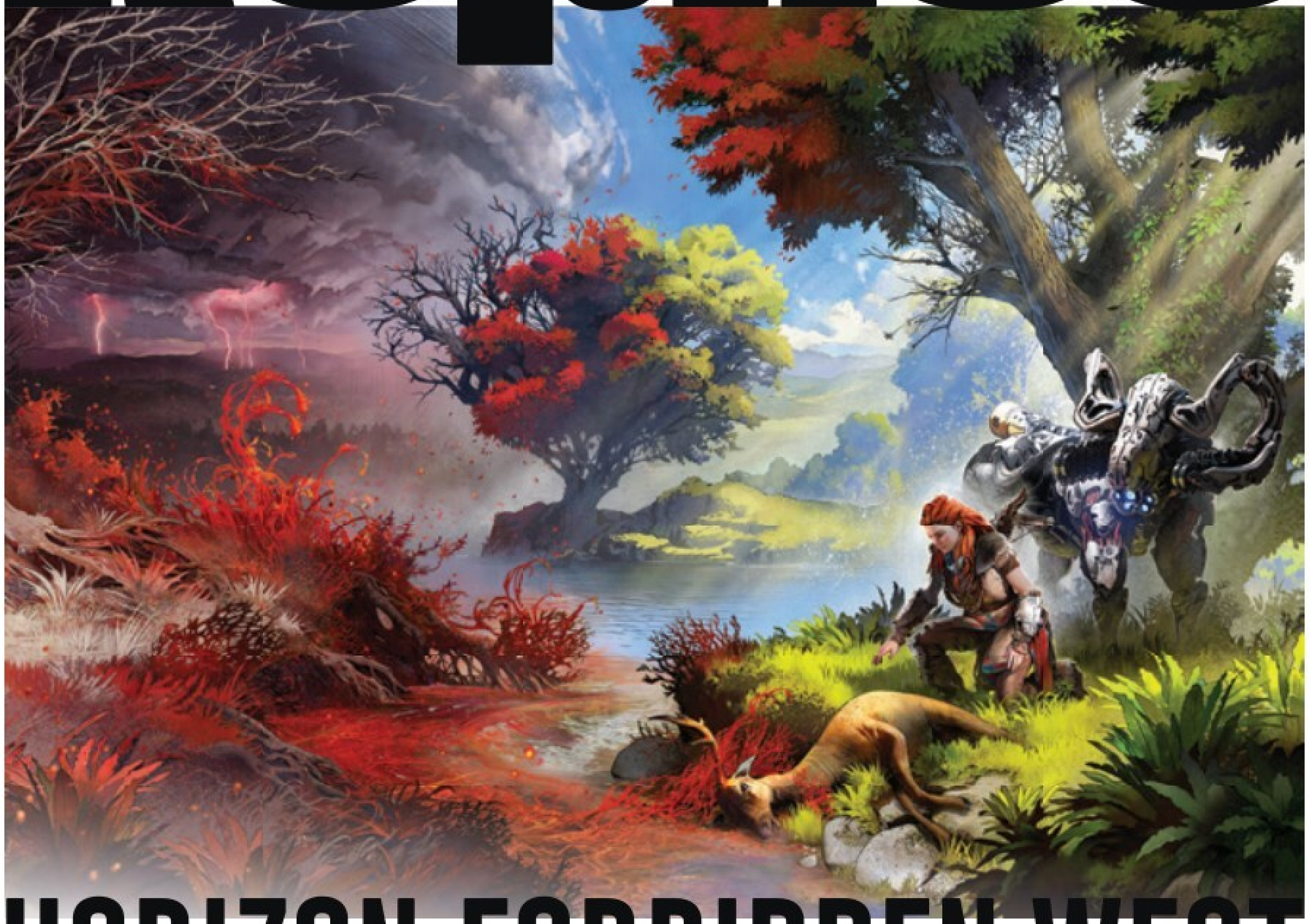
Replies



HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST

They say we shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but after seeing the beautiful Horizon Forbidden West artwork on your magazine, I felt I needed to play that game. The problem I faced: I didn't have a PlayStation 5, and I have never played Horizon Zero Dawn. I fixed that with money my parents gave me for Christmas. I lucked out and saw Wario 64 tweet about PlayStation 5s being in stock, and I managed to get one! I am nearing the halfway mark in Zero Dawn, and I absolutely love it! Make sure all of the great games you put on your covers get the best art possible because I am living proof that it matters! **– Jayna Deshay, Lawton, OK**

Mass Effect, Halo, and Assassin's Creed are the game franchises that have expanded into multimedia giants with an endless supply of comics for fans. It looks like Horizon could be the next big one. I'm currently reading the newest comic book series, *Horizon Zero Dawn: Liberation*, and think it should be mandatory for people who are looking forward to playing Forbidden West. Writer Anne Toole does a tremendous job of bringing you back into that dangerous world. **– Melody via email**

↳ *Comic books are proving to be a great medium for game makers to deliver new stories set in their universes. Along with the examples you mentioned, Fortnite uses comic books to add layers to the game's seasonal content and tease fans with new secrets. Bloodborne and Dark Souls offer deeper insights into those cryptic worlds. Here's hoping new IP like Returnal and Deathloop get the comic treatment to keep those universes alive until we hopefully get sequels.*

THE MOST UNDERRATED RPG EVER

You'll laugh at me for saying this, but I think South Park: The Fractured But Whole is one of the greatest role-playing games ever made. I'll even go as far as to say it's THE greatest licensed game ever made. It's penned by the same team that makes the show, looks and sounds just like it, and is legitimately fun and hilarious from start to finish. It's also a huge evolution over the original game, The Stick of Truth, which is also criminally underrated. I think these games don't get the justice they deserve because of the license. **– Shanna Lombardi, Dallas, TX**

↳ *We put a South Park game on one of our covers, and both titles reviewed favorably with our critics. Still, you are probably right: The South Park games may not be included in the "best RPGs ever" conversations because they are licensed games, and people often hold them in a different light. They do, however, deserve to be on those lists for the reasons you illustrated. Good news for you, Shanna, another South Park game is on the way from developer Question Games! We know nothing about the forthcoming title, but the job listings for the project seem to point to multiplayer, which could rule out being another RPG.*

ELDEN RING

I've never beaten a Souls game before and finally got into the groove for them within the past two years. I've been streaming the first Dark Souls game and playing Bloodborne on my own and hope to beat them before Elden Ring comes out. Also, being a part of Dan Tack's streaming community has just made me an ultra From Software fan by osmosis, and now Elden Ring has become more hyped for me than The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild 2. **– One Mean Leafeon Machine via Discord**

↳ *How many people never try a Souls game because of their reputation for being difficult? Each Souls-like game developed by From Software is an enormous success, but how big would they be if people weren't concerned with their difficulty? As Leafeon points out, everyone should give them a shot. Yes, they can be challenging, but that's where a lot of the fun comes from – overcoming great odds and paving your own path as you do so.*

OCULUS DEAD?

I recently saw an advertisement for the Oculus Quest 2 that called it the Meta Quest 2. I know Facebook's businesses now fall under the new Meta brand name, but I did not expect the Oculus brand being wiped out. What are your thoughts on this, *GI*? **– Cindy Wilkins, Austin, TX**

↳ ***Given how long Oculus has been running, adjusting to a complete change in the naming convention will take time. We called it Oculus in the past, and now we need to change that to Meta. Our two cents: Oculus was the better name.***

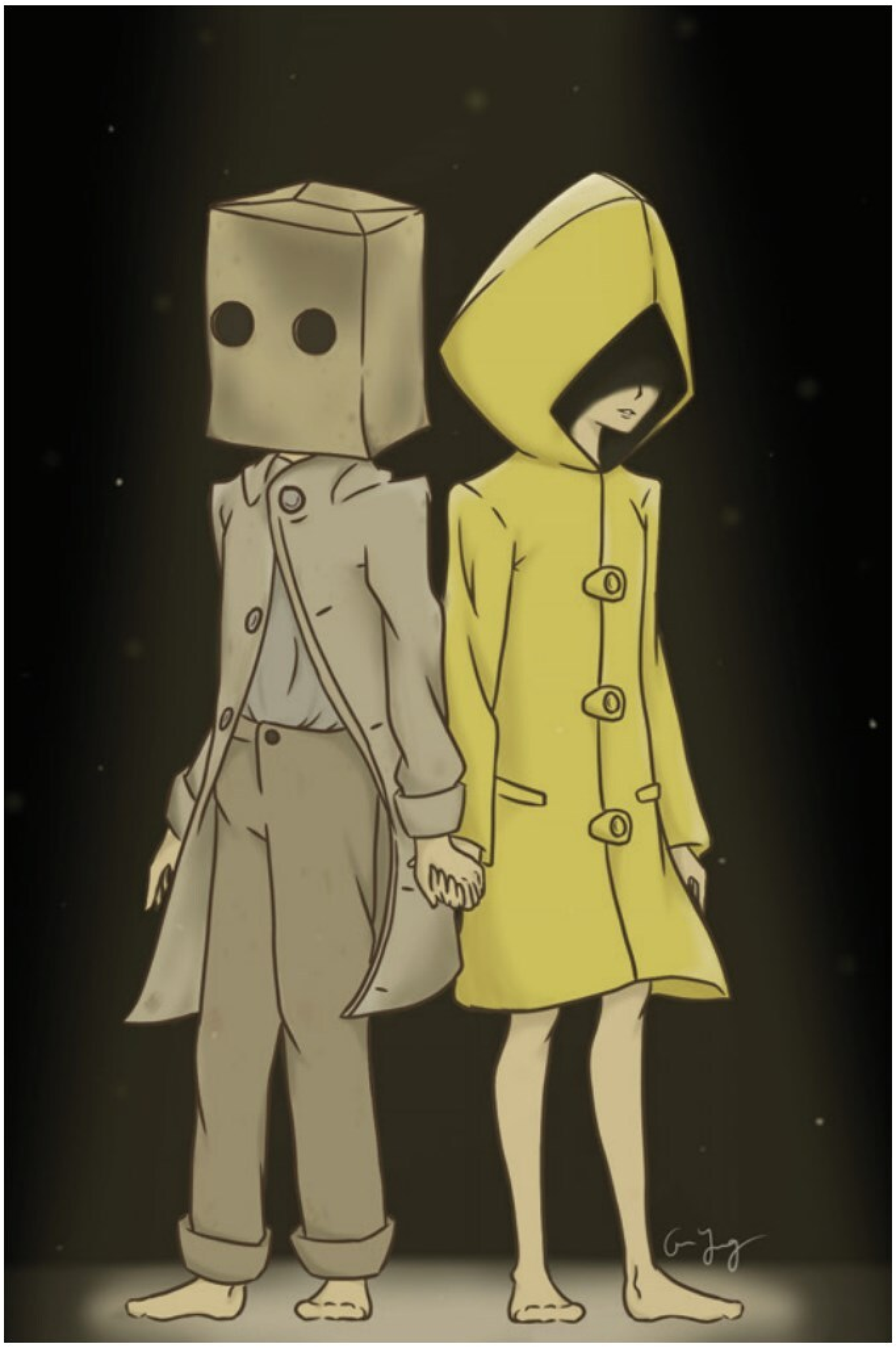
ASSASSIN'S CREED: VALHALLA

I have to give props to Ubisoft for the continuing support of Assassin's Creed: Valhalla. So many games are launched, get a couple post-release DLCs, then crickets. Ubisoft has cranked out sizable content, all the while providing updates, patches, and online tech support for this over-a-year-old game. If ever there was a justification for dropping money on the season pass, this is it. Granted, as a guy with Norse lineage, my bias may be showing, but I think this broad expansion of the ACV mythos/canon is a lesson other developers could learn from: If you build it, they will buy it. I cannot wait to see what drops next in this game that keeps on giving. **– Andrew Sulgit via email**

↳ ***Well said, Andrew. Assassin's Creed has long been an example of how DLC can deliver new experiences for fans that live up to the core game. Some of the expansions, like Assassin's Creed Odyssey's The Fate of Atlantis, are massive to the point they could be called standalone games. That right there is how you keep people engaged.***

THE ONE THAT ALMOST GOT AWAY

I freaking love the end-of-year game rundown you guys do on the podcast. I didn't even know Inscryption existed until I heard you guys talk about it, and it was what I binged this weekend. **– Logan via Discord**



Reader art submission: Grace Yang

CHASING ALOY

The question we all want an answer to: Who should play Aloy in a movie? **– Benjamin Walker via email**

↳ ***Kim Wallace: Easy! Florence Pugh! Not only does the actress resemble Aloy, but she's already proven she can hold her own in a fight and play a confident, likable figure with her work as Yelena in Marvel's*** **Black Widow** ***and*** **Hawkeye.**

↳ ***Dan Tack: Margot Robbie cause I wanna see some of that Harley Quinn energy SMASHING robots with giant mechanized clubs. Definitely the real Aloy hero we need.***

↳ ***Ben Reeves: Meryl Streep, she can do anything, right?***

↳ ***Blake Hester: Zendaya because she is very cool and badass.***

↳ ***Kristin Williams: Rose Leslie, as in "you know nothing Jon Snow" lady. She's got the hair and can clearly kick some butt.***

↳ ***Laleh Azarshin: Adèle Haenel. She's brilliant, intense and gorgeous, but also I absolutely believe her capable of destroying any who dare mess with her. Aloy could be French. I'd gladly watch that.***

↘ **Join the conversation**

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com

Soundoff: Our readers' top games of 2021

Life is Strange: True Colors. As a queer person, it was really remarkable getting to see characters who were unabashedly their authentic selves. Besides that, the story was engrossing and touching, and the performances across the board were fantastic. I cried. A lot. **– Casey David via Discord**

Resident Evil Village. I feel like it didn't get a lot of love this year. I mean, sure, when it first came out, and for the next week or so, but I feel like it fell off the face of Earth even though it was like a spiritual successor to Resident Evil 4. **– Logan via Discord**

Age of Empires 4. The combination of elements from the second and third game into a lively refresh brought a perfect punch of nostalgia and modern polish. Brilliantly produced cinematics and true enthusiasm for history showcased the development team's passion for the project. RTS is alive and well.
– JHerb24 via Discord

Here is an off-beat pick: Road 96. It is a shame small games like this don't get talked about more, but this game has a specific emotional appeal similar to Life is Strange. [Road 96] creates a unique sort of power fantasy where teens have a whole underground network to either try to change their country politically or escape by getting across the border. You have to make choices along the way and build up relationships to unlock all the possible options.
– Ninja Master Dave via Discord

DAYS GONE

I can't for the life of me figure out why there's so much hate and lack of interest in a sequel for Days Gone? Other than Deacon being a little rich around the edges, it's such a great combination of engaging story, good combat, and a cool world. I just can't believe they aren't going to continue the story, especially with the cliffhanger they left with [redacted]. WTF, Sony?
– Dylan Ratzsch via Email

↳ *There are plenty of Days Gone fans who want a sequel, and like with any game, there are those not interested. Unfortunately for Bend Studio, Sony and PlayStation fall into the latter camp and what they say goes. As for why, our guess is it's a mix of the game's critical reception, sales not lining up with expectations (this doesn't mean the game didn't sell well, though), and the general waning interest in the zombie, err, Freaker genre. Not to mention, PlayStation already has a really big zombie IP in The Last of Us. Why create competition for it?*

MULTIVERSUS

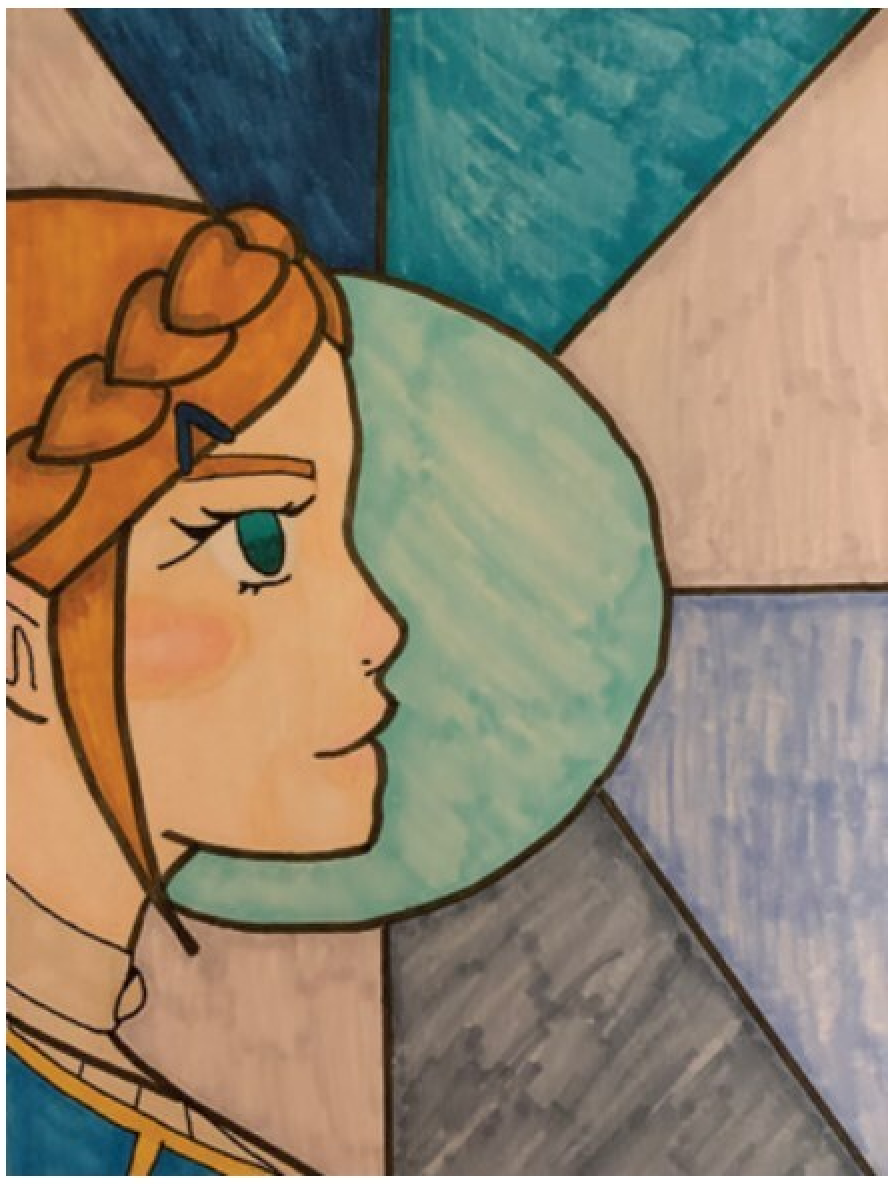
In one of your annual April Fool's *Game Infarcer* articles a while back, you featured a mock fighting game entitled Mortal Kombat vs. Warner Bros. that featured MK characters facing off against familiar WB-owned characters, such as Bugs Bunny. Recently, WB Games announced a fighting game entitled Multiversus, which will feature their characters, including Bugs Bunny, duking it out. While the gameplay will be more in the vein of Super Smash Bros., it seems that you were almost right on the mark! So, I'm guessing that you borrowed a crystal ball from *The Simpsons*?
– Austin Parsley via email

↳ *Here's what we think happened: Developers at WB saw our* Game Infarcer *joke and said, "You know what? Let's make that game." Flash forward a few years, and it's now a reality. We'll have to check out Multiversus' credits to see if we are thanked in any way. We had a good laugh at the announcement but were disappointed that Willy (from* Free Willy *fame) isn't on the roster yet.*

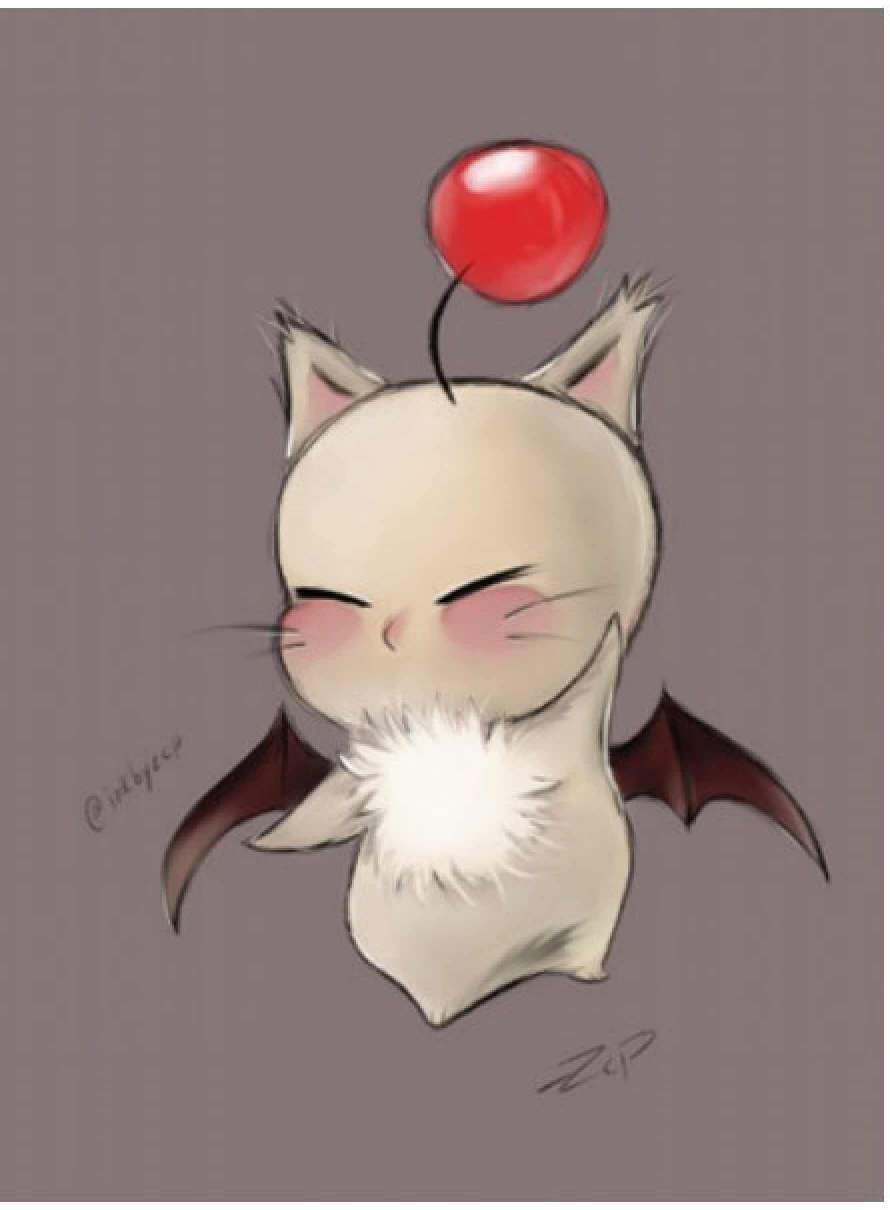
NEW GAME PLUS

I am very frustrated with massive open-world games or RPGs launching without New Game Plus. I finished the Far Cry 6 campaign and, without spoiling anything, have nothing to do minus the weekly tasks. And I can't invite a friend to play with me because players that have completed the campaign are unable to invite players to join them. I don't know where this trend of leaving players with nothing to do after completing the campaign started. We spend hours unlocking items; why wouldn't we want to start the story over with the items we poured hours into earning? Please shed some light on this. **– Lance via Email**

↳ *We often hear studios bemoan having to cut New Game Plus from their project due to lack of development time. Given that it's something that happens after the credits roll and a good majority of players may never get that far, this often makes it one of the first items developers cut from their wishlist. More developers are adding New Game Plus post-launch, which is something to keep an eye out for with each new game you play. We'll likely continue to see both approaches over time. Video games will not overtake the movie industry, and will continue to sit alongside it as a great means of entertainment.*



Reader art submission: Eliza Bartlett, age 12



Reader art submission:
Zola Cate Picone

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

I wanted to let you know how excited I was when I opened issue 340 and on the A Vision of PS5's Future saw that Sony is planning a KOTOR remake. It was the first Star Wars game I ever played, and I've carried a massive torch for it ever since. I lost hope of seeing a KOTOR game after LucasArts was sold, but I'm glad I was wrong. I can't wait to learn more and get the game. Of course, I'll need a PS5, but at least I have motivation! **– Katelyn Scott via email**

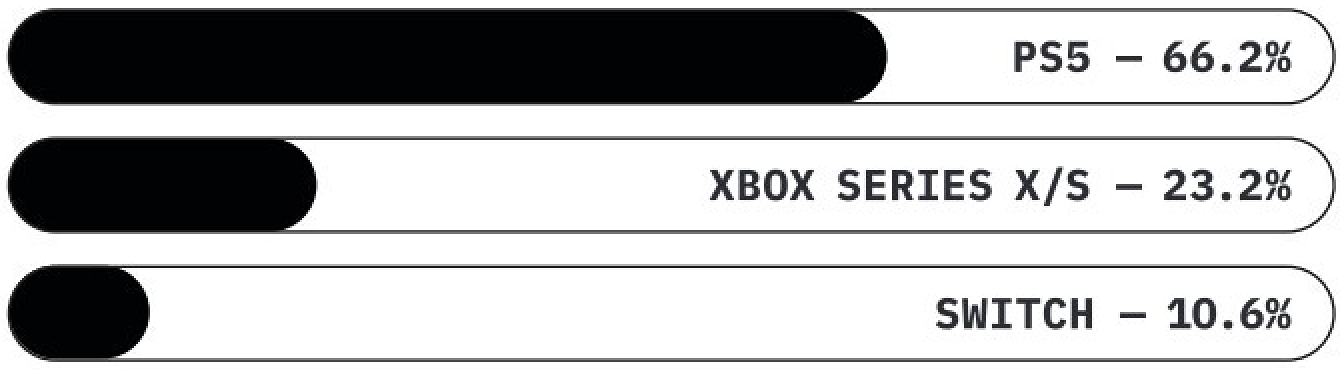
↪ ***Lucasfilm's decision to wipe out the Expanded Universe and start from scratch again in 2012 made a KOTOR sequel or revival seem unlikely, but some things are too good to say goodbye to entirely. KOTOR fits that bill. Even though it won't be a part of Star Wars' ongoing continuity, it falls into what Lucasfilm now calls Legends – the great stories of the Expanded Universe that are worth remembering. We have high hopes that the remake will hold true to the classic game, but we also want Lucasfilm to try new things to surprise us again. The twist ending will likely be the same, but we'd love to see new viewpoints in the journey. Of course, HK-47 needs to be there, too. He's the best droid out there next to R2-D2.*** ■

WANNA COLLECT 'EM ALL

As a 32-year-old who had a years-long subscription to *Nintendo Power* back in the day, I adored receiving that 25th Anniversary Pokémon poster in issue 341! My wife and I hope to find more posters in future *Game Informer* issues! **– AJ Rodriguez via email**

Poll:

Which system do you think will have the best 2022?



12,522 votes – Poll conducted on Twitter

Reader art winner: Alexandra Housley

↘
Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

INTERVIEW

The Writer Returns

Sam Lake teases the first details for Alan Wake 2, Remedy Entertainment's approach to survival horror, and the failed attempts to get this sequel made

BY ANDREW REINER

SAM LAKE
Creative Director at Remedy Entertainment

Over a decade has passed since the first Alan Wake game was released. Why come back with a sequel now? Walk me through that decade.
One of my early learnings from working on Max Payne was there wasn't a second of thought given to the idea of a sequel. I went, "Oops, I killed all of the characters!" It took some clever thinking to continue that story. When we worked on Alan Wake, we thought about where it would go beyond the first game. We thought about the sequel. The ending we had for Alan Wake was perfect, but at the same time, a big cliffhanger. The thinking was the story would continue.

Timing is important when pitching a project. Coming out of Alan Wake, I think the industry was thinking linear, single-player experiences are dead. Nobody was really interested in doing more of that. We pitched continuing the story, but it never went anywhere. We took some ideas out of that pitch and made a much smaller scale game, Alan Wake's American Nightmare. As the conversation with Microsoft Studios went on, we concepted a different thing for them, which was Quantum Break. After coming out of that, we had a new concept for Alan Wake. We went around with new ideas for the game structure, and ultimately, after doing a round of pitching, concluded that we should lean on the new things and not have it be an Alan Wake game. That ended up being the birth of Control.

Even during Control, I was concepting a new version of Alan Wake. That ended up resonating really well with all of the people we talked to. Epic Games was just putting together its publishing [strategies], and we sat down and started chatting. Epic's Hector [Sanchez, head of games publishing] comes from Annapurna, and he really understands storytelling in video games. It felt like we hit it off really well in those early discussions. After some negotiations, we got back the publishing rights to the original Alan Wake from Microsoft. We were in [a] position to create Alan Wake Remastered and have it be multiplatform. At the same time, the idea of the Remedy Connected Universe had been growing stronger, and Control established Alan Wake was in the same universe. We had the AWE expansion that was all about the crossover. It seemed to be setting up something [laughs].

All of the pieces were coming together. After a long, hard journey, it was the perfect time for Alan Wake 2.

I'm glad this version of Alan Wake 2 gets to legitimately be Alan Wake 2. Were you concerned this idea might also get spun into something else?
I was certain it would happen this time around. There was also commitment from Remedy overall that now was the time to do this.

Alan Wake 2

You announced it would be survival horror. How does that influence your writing and approach to the game? Does the genre dictate the direction for you?
To me, [game making] is always a collaboration, and we have an awesome team. It's an iterative process. Through the years, I have always looked at the story process as a way of making the overall experience tighter. The story of the original Alan Wake had a lot of horror elements to it, but the gameplay wasn't horror. [For Alan Wake2], the fact that the gameplay is survival horror doesn't affect it at all. It was clear this would be an intense psychological horror story, and slowing down the gameplay to be more intense made things nicely click into place.

Is the intensity of the psychological horror a product of Alan Wake – or "The Writer" – being trapped in the Dark Place for an extended period of time?
For those answers, we will have to wait. I'm intentionally trying not to go into the setup of it.

I'll make you a little more uncomfortable. In the trailer, I got a vibe of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Anything you want to say to that?
Not commenting on that specific thing but looking back on Alan Wake and the story so far through American Nightmare, there are mentions of Mr. Scratch, who kind of seems to be this evil double of our hero. Even though this is a sequel and is a part of the Remedy Connected Universe, we want this to be an experience that someone [who] hasn't played any Remedy games can jump into and enjoy the hell out of. At the same time, it is a sequel. For our longtime fans, there's going to be a lot of layered content and discoveries. If you are excited by this idea, there is plenty of time to check out Alan Wake Remastered and Control.

Where are you at in development? You have 2023 as a release date.
We are in actual production. That means we are done with concepting and done with preproduction. Things are rolling along nicely. Concepting and preproduction in Covid times proved to be rather challenging. We're used to being in the same room, bouncing around ideas, and that freeform approach to ideas was really challenging to do [remotely]. We got over that hurdle, the plans are in place, and now we're executing.

Anything you can share about the tech behind this experience?
Yeah, it is our tech again: Northlight, which was the case with Alan Wake, Quantum Break, and Control. It's the next-gen version – we are pushing the engine to do things it couldn't do before. Already I feel the next-gen version of Control is looking pretty damn good. We are confident [Alan Wake 2] is going to be the most beautiful and detailed Remedy game ever. The setup and horror aspect of darkness and light gives us a lot of areas where we can push the engine and make it look stylized, unique, and do things we haven't done before.

Was what we saw in the trailer in-game or representative of what it will look like?
The trailer was a setup piece, and because we are still in production, we don't have polished final content. We shared our assets to make the trailer, so yes, it gives you an idea of the direction we are aiming for. This was more of a mood piece.

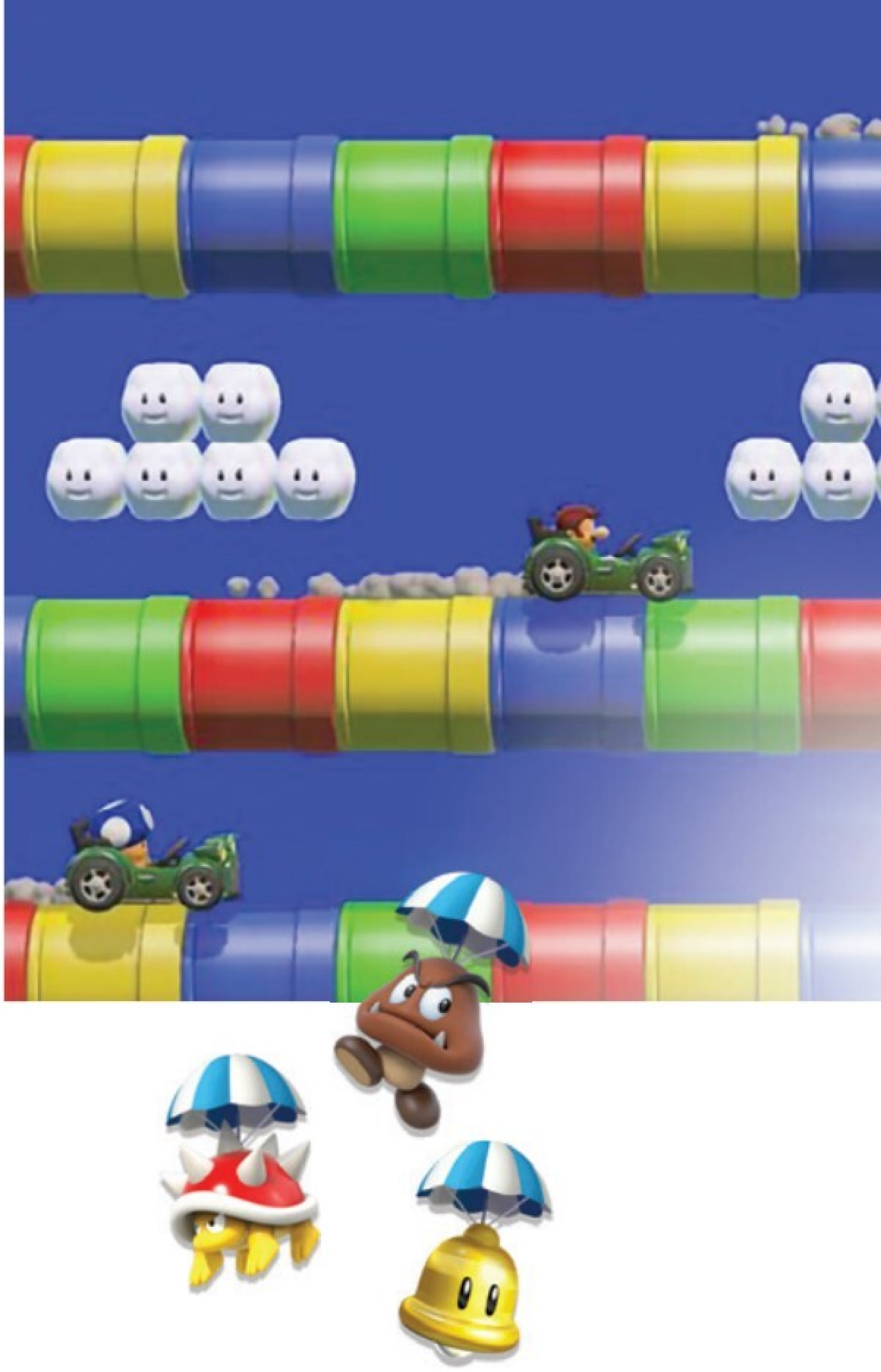
If fans are going back into Alan Wake Remastered and Control, is there something they should be looking for?
We love doing Easter eggs, and we will continue doing that. During Control, it became more purposeful, especially with the Remedy Connected Universe. There is a lot of exploration-based content that [is] building steps forward. Quite a bit of that is there to set things up. If you dig into Control, the AWE expansion, there are things to find. Even in Alan Wake Remastered, we added small things you can go discover and say, "Wait a minute, that wasn't in the original game." They are all building up to something. ■

ALL AGES

LEARNING TO PLAY

A guide to help your little ones get into games

BY ANDREW REINER



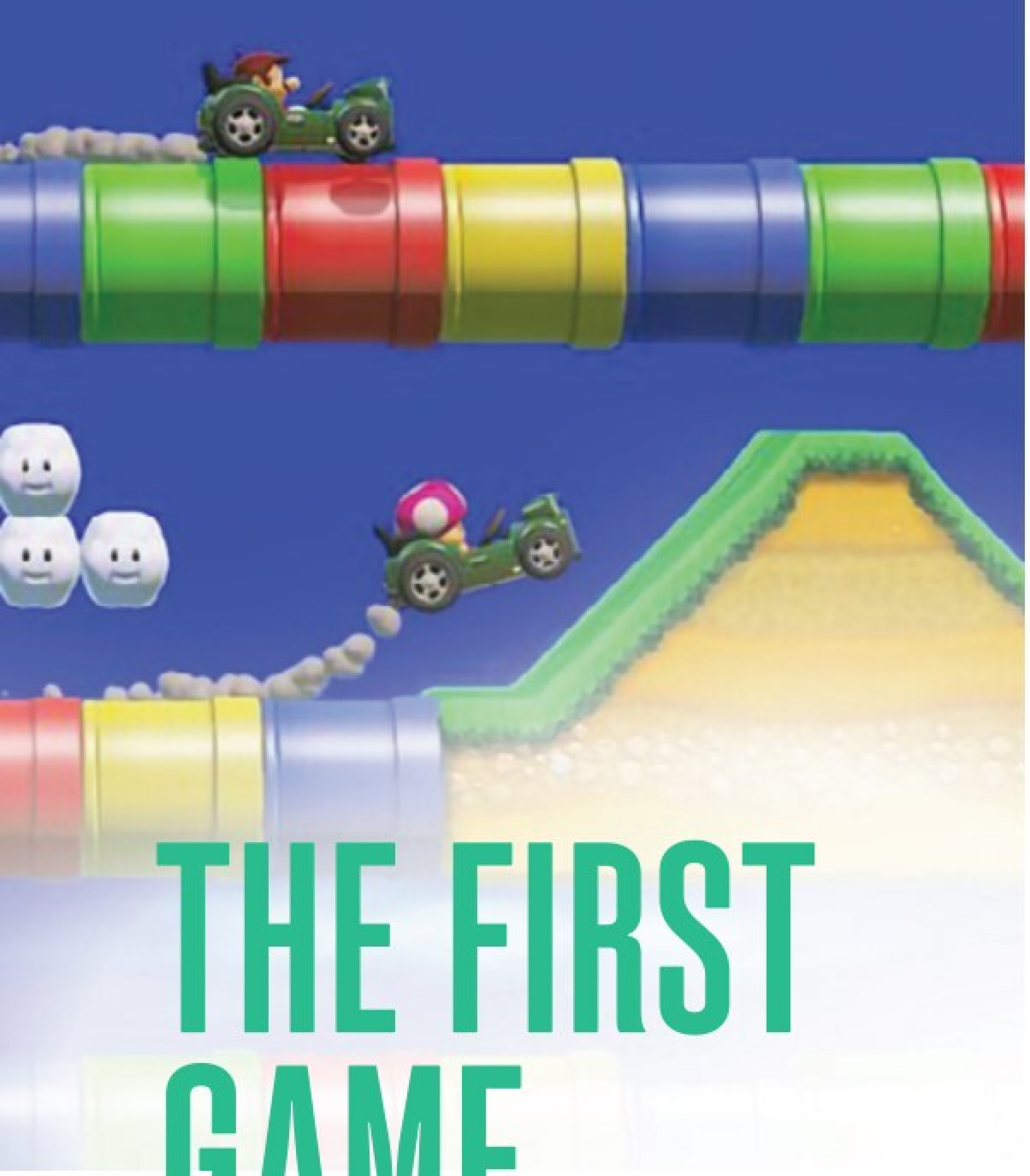
HOW OLD SHOULD YOUR CHILDREN BE when introducing them to video games? What are the best titles to teach them how to use a controller? Are there games that both a youngster and adult will find equally enjoyable?

As a father of a nine-year-old daughter, I get asked these questions frequently by people with children of their own, and I always stumble with my response as I try to recall the route I took to acclimate her to games. Most kids want to play games at an early age, yet there aren't many resources out there that help parents and guardians find a safe and rewarding gaming path for their kiddos. I hope this new reoccurring All Ages section helps people find solutions to their children's gaming needs.

This month's section focuses on teaching kids how to use a controller first. The games that accomplish this task also help them navigate 2D and 3D spaces.

I'll offer suggestions for cooperative games, the best non-violent options, genre entry points, and more in the months ahead. If you have questions or want to explore specific topics, drop me a letter at reiner@gameinformer.com with your thoughts.

My efforts to get my daughter into the console gaming space were not easy. Her frustrations with using a controller for the first time were made worse by the fact that a good number of licensed children's games are downright awful and don't appear to take their targeted age group to heart. That said, we found a handful of games that are fantastic entry points. Here's where to start.



THE FIRST GAME

I'm guessing most of you have visions of your child playing one of your all-time favorite games as their first. Just know that that playthrough won't go well at the age of three or four, but it will make for a great photo that you can cherish forever. Once you get the pictures out of the way, I recommend docking a Switch to your TV and having your child's first game be Super Mario Maker 2. For years I suggested parents try the original Super Mario Maker with their kids, delivering results. Many of these kids developed the base skills needed to open the doors to the entire gaming world.

Why did I choose the Mario Maker series over the other more popular Mario games? Most video games are violent, even kids' games. Nintendo's historic Mario franchise is viewed as one of the best family-friendly series out there, but it, too, is violent. The plumber uses his boots to squash turtles and torches other critters with fireballs. Mario also plummets to his death, and his battles against Bowser are always intense. With Super Mario Maker 2, you can remove all of that violence and create the perfect starter experience for your child. That's the rub, though: You have to make it yourself. Using the game's creation tools, you can create levels free of both violence and death. No enemies. No pitfalls. Just simple running and jumping exercises, from left to right. These stages teach your kid how to run, jump, and use items in safe and fun ways. With a deep well of creative options, you can essentially create an endless number of stages that help your child learn how to use a controller. Given Mario's simplicity, just a couple of buttons are used, and you have the choice of either the analog stick or directional pad. Your youngster should get the hang of the gameplay reasonably quickly and will be ready to move on to other games in a matter of days or weeks.

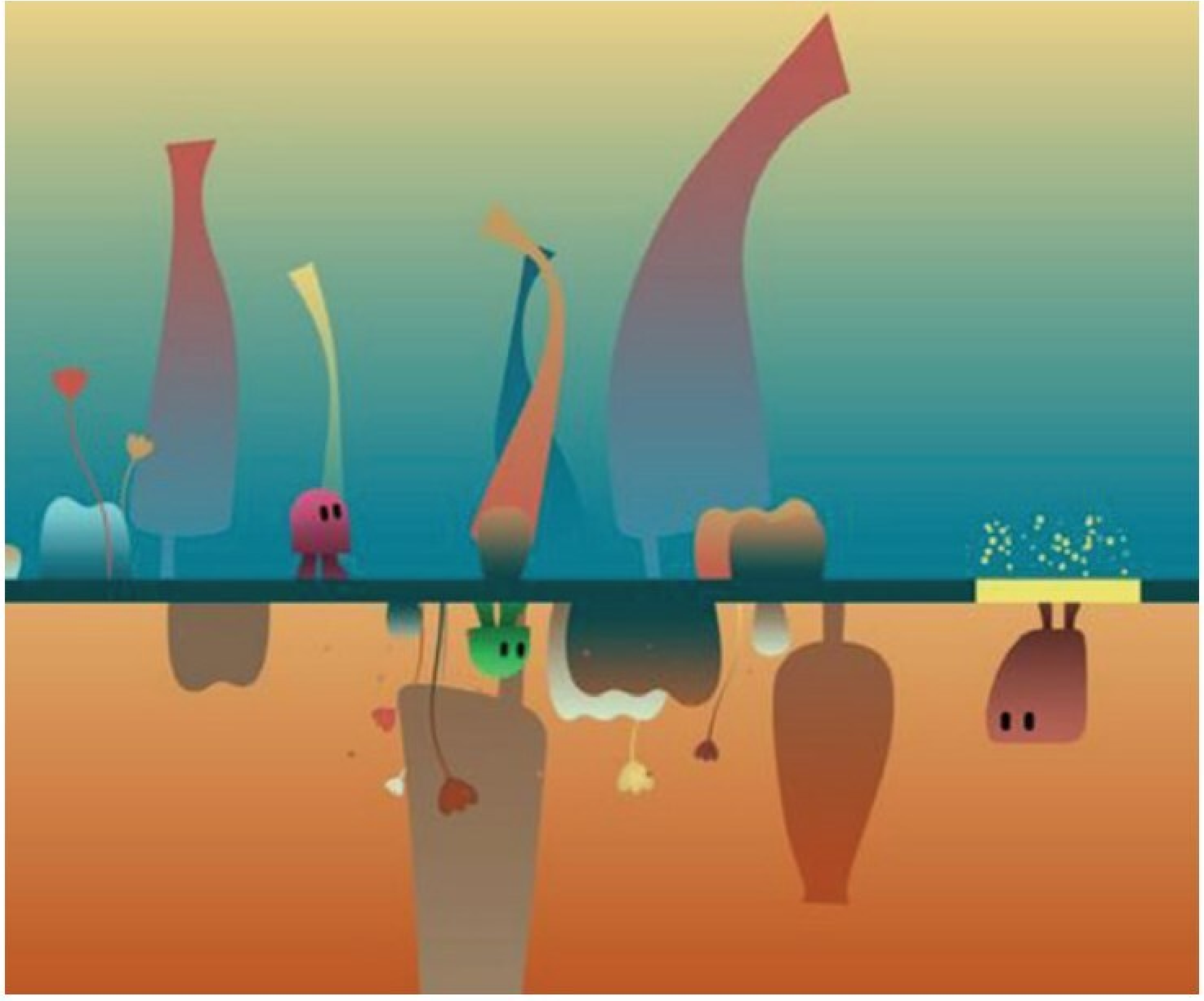
PLAYING TOGETHER

Taking the controller from your child to show them how to do something can lead to frustration on their end. The better approach is to be in the game world with them, where you can communicate and use your character to show them the moves. 2013's Ibb & Obb from developer Sparpweed is a great example of how this can work. It also serves as a nice continuation of Mario's sidescrolling gameplay within puzzle-based levels that you and your kiddo will have to solve together. The first 20-percent of the Ibb & Obb's puzzles are easy to solve and don't require much in terms of dexterity. The game gets harder and more complicated as it goes, but by then, your child should be well versed in the movements and thinking required.

Ibb & Obb can currently be played on PC and Switch. It delivers light violence in the form of enemy obstacles but is fairly safe in that regard. After spending time with this game, your child should be ready for the more mature platformers like Super Mario 3D World and Yoshi's Crafted World.

Staying on the theme of Switch – the all-around best machine for kids and families – Mario Kart 8 Deluxe is a fantastic entry point into exploring 3D space. This is another game that you can play together, but you won't necessarily have a hand in guiding your child's movements. Don't worry, the game does that for you through options called Smart Steering and Auto-Accelerate, which are on by default. The game essentially plays itself. Your child can freely manipulate their racer's movement and speed, but should they get stuck, the game will auto-correct for them when they stop pressing buttons.

With a wide roster of characters from other well-known Nintendo franchises, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe is a nice conversation starter that gives you a moment to talk to your child about The Legend of Zelda, Splatoon, Donkey Kong, and Animal Crossing games. Planting the seed about these top-tier franchises is a good thing, as you'll likely play them in a couple of years.



↘ Ibb & Obb; opposite: Super Mario Maker 2

Minecraft is another excellent entry point into three-dimensional worlds, as it allows you to create a safe environment for you and your child to interact with. The controls are rather complex, however, and onboarding can take time. With my daughter, our first month of playing Minecraft together consisted of her having limited input. We made a zoo together. I handled the construction of the facilities, and she figured out which animals would go into the habitats. I filled her inventory with eggs that spawn animals. We would run around the world, open doors, and place animals where she felt they belonged. After a month, she tested her hand at building, and within a matter of weeks, was a wiz at it, being able to create elaborate houses and structures with ease.

Do the kids enjoy *Where's Waldo* books? If you don't mind getting fingerprints on your TV, Hidden Through Time offers a similar interactive experience. You can either hand the controller over to your kid to find their own secrets or have them point to what they want you to interact with on the TV. The levels in Hidden Through Time grow in size, change historical themes, and have plenty to look at, making for a spirited time sleuthing with the little ones.

One of the most relaxing cooperative games I've ever played is a simulator called Farm Together. Released on Switch, PC, and playable on Xbox and PlayStation consoles, Farm Together is a great option for kids that may teach them a thing or two about counting and money management, but don't read into that as a roadblock. Kids can freely plant crops, build houses, and emote away without worry of finances. Farm Together has no fail states and is all about having fun with family and friends. Up to 16 players can be on the same farm, working on it together. During the pandemic, Farm Together has been a wonderful way to connect with other families for some game time.

↙
Counter-clockwise from top left: Minecraft, Farm Together, Hidden Through Time, Lego Marvel Superheroes 2, Animal Crossing: New Horizons

IF THEY CAN'T READ, DON'T PLAY THESE

Most of "Best Video Games for Kids" lists I see online recommend Pokémon and Animal Crossing. Both of these options require children to be fluent readers. I would avoid both of them until your child is roughly seven or eight years of age. If you play them before they can read, the experience will likely be miserable. With your kid holding the controller, you'll have to sit over their shoulder and read all of the text that appears on screen. I tried this with my daughter, and it didn't go well. The look of boredom on her face said enough, and her tapping the button to skip the text I was trying to read made the game practically unplayable. Your best move is to avoid having a bad taste associated with these beloved franchises and wait a few years until your little one is old enough to read.

I would also hold off on Roblox for reading purposes, but also due to the uncertainty that comes from trying out new games. There are thousands to choose from – most created by the Roblox players themselves – and you never know what you will get. Yes, Roblox's visuals scream of kids, but it isn't a fully curated experience for children, and there are many pitfalls that they can be subjected to, like inappropriate adult-themed content, microtransactions, and player abuse. For Roblox, I'd wait until your child is six or seven, and you'll want to be around to monitor the gaming sessions until you feel comfortable letting your child play unsupervised.

IF YOU DON'T MIND A LITTLE VIOLENCE

One of the big challenges parents face is sheltering their children from specific themes and violence. A Disney movie could suddenly turn disturbing, or a birthday present from a relative could produce a Nerf blaster or Lego set filled with swords and guns. It's hard to avoid all forms of violence, especially in video games. If you don't mind the cartoon variety, TT Games' long-running Lego series is fantastic for cooperative play. There's a steep learning curve for controller input – such as holding down or rapidly tapping a specific button within a set period of time – but the experiences are always fun and rewarding. I'd avoid Lego Worlds, given the content is fairly confusing. I highly recommend starting with Lego Marvel Superheroes, Lego Harry Potter, and any of the Star Wars titles. Speaking of, Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga's release is right around the corner and could be a great jumping-on point for your family. You can read more about it on page 71. ■

MICROSOFT ACQUIRES ACTIVISION BLIZZARD

A titanic shift in the game publishing landscape **BY MATT MILLER**

IN A SURPRISE ANNOUNCEMENT late January, Microsoft Gaming CEO Phil Spencer posted a blog with profound implications for the future of gaming. In one of the largest entertainment acquisitions in history, Microsoft is buying Activision Blizzard for a reported $68.7 billion.

The move is a major play for Microsoft as it consolidates a stronger hold on the gaming market. Those efforts include last year's significant purchase of ZeniMax Media for $7.5 billion, which brought in studios like Arkane (Dishonored), id Software (Doom), MachineGames (Wolfenstein), and Bethesda (The Elder Scrolls).

The Activision acquisition brings even more developers under the Microsoft banner, including Infinity Ward (Call of Duty: Modern Warfare), Blizzard (Diablo), and King (Candy Crush Saga). With the deal's completion, Microsoft will oversee 30 internal game studios, and other related companies, like the esports-focused Major League Gaming.

In its public statements on the implications of the purchase, Microsoft called out plans for further expansion into the mobile games market, targeting franchises like Halo, Warcraft, and Candy Crush. The company also touted its growing Game Pass portfolio, which Microsoft states is currently sitting at over 25 million subscribers, and clearly plans to expand the service with Activision Blizzard's catalog.

When the company's transaction finalizes in fiscal 2023, Microsoft is set to become the third-largest company in gaming by revenue, behind Tencent and Sony.

The acquisition comes amid a withering indictment of Activision, with numerous allegations of sexual harassment, the treatment of marginalized workers, and a call for the ousting of Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick. Those accusations include an active lawsuit by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing over "violations of the state's civil rights and equal pay laws."

Spencer's blog post seems to address those concerns, albeit obliquely. "We deeply value individual studio cultures," Spencer writes. "We also believe that creative success and autonomy go hand-in-hand with treating every person with dignity and respect. We hold all teams, and all leaders, to this commitment. We're looking forward to extending our culture of proactive inclusion to the great teams across Activision Blizzard." As of this writing, Bobby Kotick is set to continue serving as CEO of Activision Blizzard. Both *Bloomberg* and *The Wall Street Journal* are reporting Kotick is expected to leave once the deal is finalized, but whether or not that's true remains to be seen.

The deal is sure to have significant implications for hobbyist gamers. Sony PlayStation owners should plan that some expected upcoming games may not hit PlayStation dashboards. And Microsoft's increased stable of game franchises has suddenly made the Xbox Series X/S a significantly more enticing prospect for those considering a new-gen console purchase.

At the same time, the merging of two major players in gaming may ring warning bells for some. The business move marks a continuation of waves of studio consolidations in recent years, along with the attendant potential for the stifling of creativity and risk-taking that can sometimes result. ■

QUICK TAKE

Phil Spencer is good at saying the right thing. Backward compatibility is important. Crossplay, too. And revelations about Activision are "disturbing." Now it's time to put platitudes into action. Xbox needs to commit to improving Activision's culture, recognize employee efforts to unionize, and separate it from its current CEO, Bobby Kotick. Otherwise, it's just buying golden parachutes.

- BLAKE HESTER

Transcending the Game

Remembering the legendary John Madden and his impact on sports video games

BY BRIAN SHEA

THE MADDEN NAME has become synonymous with EA Sports and its annualized NFL franchise, but to merely say that the games industry lost its football namesake would do a disservice to the legendary coach, commentator, and game franchise figurehead. John Madden was more than just a name on a box; he was instrumental in creating the longest-running sports franchise in gaming history.

When Trip Hawkins founded Electronic Arts in 1982, he wanted to take sports video games to the next level. He aimed to create a football game that was realistic, fun, and above all else, authentic to the sport. "Football is really complicated," Hawkins said in Netflix's 2020 *High Score* limited series. "So if I had something really tricky and challenging to do, maybe I could work with a coach who could provide additional knowledge and insight."

Hawkins reached out to former Super Bowl-winning head coach and then-CBS color commentator John Madden. In 1984, when Hawkins first approached Madden, the EA founder didn't know if the 8-bit machines of the time could handle 22 players on the field at once, so he pitched a 7-on-7 variation of the sport for his video game. However, Madden was adamant that if you wanted to be authentic to football, it needed to feature the full 11 players on each team. Because of this, the first entry, John Madden Football, took four years to create, with the game finally launching in 1988. Madden provided insight into how the game should work, strategies the teams should implement, and the series' first playbooks.

While Hawkins was pleased with the performance and reception of the game, he looked forward to when 16-bit machines would let him further realize his vision. Once John Madden Football made the leap to Sega Genesis in 1990 and Super Nintendo in 1991, the franchise reached new levels of success. By 1996, the series had become the best-selling sports video game franchise to that date.

While John Madden understood the entertainment value of the games, he also viewed them as a great educational tool he could use for coaching. "There's a lot of kids that have learned football by playing the Madden game, where they'll say, 'We ought to do it like they do it in the video game,'" he said in ESPN's 2021 *All Madden* documentary.

Through 2000, John Madden remained the face of the series, appearing on every cover. That changed in 2001, when the franchise began using NFL stars and introducing the concept of the cover athlete. However, Madden did return to the cover for a special commemorative edition of Madden NFL 07 to celebrate his induction into the NFL Hall of Fame.

"It's mind-boggling that it's become such a big brand that it's just called 'Madden,'" Hawkins, who left EA in 1994, said in the *All Madden* documentary. "Maybe Madden as a brand is still going to be around hundreds of years from now."

Madden remained involved with the development team through his role with the NFL, providing insight to the developers about the league's rules, until his death. John Madden passed away in his home in Pleasanton, California, on December 28, 2021, at the age of 85. "John Madden was synonymous with the sport of football for more than 50 years," a public statement from Electronic Arts read. "His knowledge of the game was second only to his love for it, and his appreciation for everyone that ever stepped on the gridiron. A humble champion, a willing teacher, and forever a coach." ■

1
Analogue Pocket
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GEAR

GO RETRO

These modern machines bring classic gaming to life **BY MATT MILLER & ALEX VAN AKEN**

① ANALOGUE POCKET

The Analogue Pocket is a marvel of design, featuring a stunning 3.5" LCD screen with configurable scaling and display modes, an optional HDMI TV dock, a popular music creation suite called Nanoloop, and GB Studio game engine compatibility. Most importantly, it plays original Game Boy, Game Boy Color, and Game Boy Advance game cartridges with zero emulation. The handheld also supports Sega Game Gear cartridges via a proprietary adapter sold separately, with Neo Geo Pocket, Atari Lynx, and TurboGrafx-16 adapters planned to be released in 2022 for $29.99 each.

Whether your collection is burgeoning or well-established, the handheld introduces new levels of vibrancy to a beloved era of portable gaming. Despite a few quirks, it provides unmatched convenience for exploring the vast history of handheld games. The Analogue Pocket is a collector's dream and sets a new standard for portable handhelds, retro or otherwise.

$219 | *analogue.co*

② FOR KIDS & KIDS AT HEART PAC-MAN ARCADE BUNDLE

Arcade1Up has built a well-deserved reputation for its arcade machines, which wistfully recall the earliest days of gaming in those dim-lit rooms filled with coin-operated machines. While available sold separately, this two-cabinet bundle nets some serious savings, and aims to reach players looking to share a bit of arcade magic with a new generation.

The included Arcade1Up Jr. Pac-Man machine is a 36.5-inch tall cabinet with 4-way joystick and oversized ball top and buttons for easy handling. Three early classics are playable on the 8-inch screen, including Pac-Man, Dig Dug, and Galaga, and each features customizable difficulty to help new players get their feet wet.

The accompanying Bandai Namco Entertainment Legacy Edition Arcade Machine stands at a taller 46 inches, or 59-inches if you choose to connect the included riser. The 17-inch LCD screen displays any of the 12 included games, most of which expand on the Pac-Man, Dig Dug, and Galaga properties available in the smaller kids' cabinet.

With classic cabinet art and a nod to cross-generational gaming fun, these side-by-side machines make for an appealing addition to a family game room.

$599 | *arcade1up.com*

3

PAC-MAN
PAC-MAN
ARCADE1UP

2

❸ ATARI VCS

Atari has opted for an unusual approach to reviving interest in its classic catalog. The VCS is a nostalgic throwback of a gaming system. The outer cabinet is available in a modern black case, or alternately with a walnut front finish that recalls the original 2600. The included "vault" of games contains a vast selection of original Atari arcade and 2600 games to explore, including hits like Yars Revenge, Lunar Lander, and Missile Command. You can also tap into the Antstream Arcade library of retro games. For an additional cost, you can snag either a modern controller or a throwback Atari joystick.

At the same time, behind the curtain, the VCS can function as a customizable PC with an included 8GB of RAM, 32 GB of storage, and an AMD APU and GPU, though without additional tweaks, don't expect this to run many modern games. The system can also serve as a streaming box, if you wish to access services like Netflix, Disney+, or HBO Max.

The VCS has a high nostalgia factor and offers an easy way to play some of the earliest console games. But a loud fan, limited PC functionality, and an unimpressive OS experience mean that this device is reserved exclusively for the most enthusiastic Atari fans looking to relive the glory days. For many others, the VCS may represent a significant gulf between value and sticker price.

$299 | *atarivcs.com*

❹ GAME & WATCH: THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

Tiny and charming, Nintendo continues the celebration of its earliest handheld with this Zelda-themed Game & Watch. The angular corners and raised bevels ably recall the old Game & Watch series, but the very small backlit color LCD screen is a notable step up from the old times. Three full-length early franchise games are playable, including The Legend of Zelda, Zelda II: The Adventure of Link, and the original Game Boy version of Link's Awakening, along with two smaller games – a Link-themed version of the Whack-A-Mole-esque Vermin, and a new Timer game that lets you set a timer and battle an endless series of Zelda II enemies for a high score.

All the games are solid ports, and it's lovely to have them all together in a compact package. But as the name implies, this is also a time-keeping device. Turn on the clock, and the current time of day is displayed in graphic tiles on the game screen, even as an A.I. version of Link happily roams and stabs his way through background environments from the original game. By plugging in the USB-C charge cable (or another, since the included one is only a few inches long), you can set the system up on a desk or counter as an amusing animated time reference without battery life concerns.

Simple and nostalgic, it's a nice callback of a device, even if the appeal is mainly for novelty's sake. ■

$49.99 | *nintendo.com*

GAME & WATCH
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA
2:21
GAME
TIME
PAUSE/SET
SELECT
START
B
A
Nintendo

4

GEAR

BUREAU TREASURES

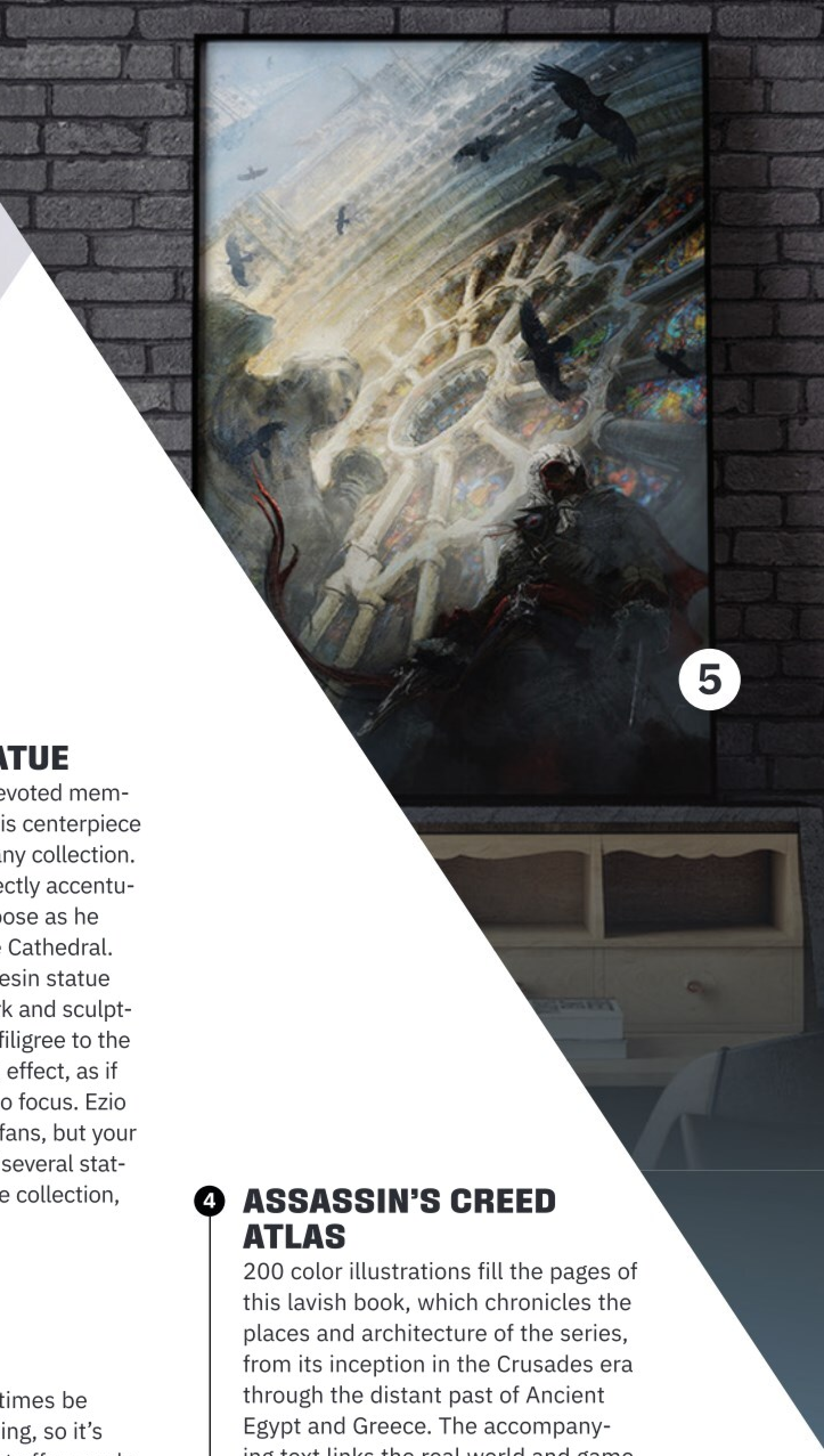
Feed your need for Assassin’s Creed

BY MATT MILLER

❶ ASSASSIN’S CREED BROTHERHOOD OF VENICE

One of the most impressive and large-scale board game projects of recent years, this cooperative campaign adventure can keep your gaming group occupied for months. It earns its high price tag with stellar production values and tons of content to explore. The game’s many playable scenarios unfold on modular tile boards and utilize over 140 gorgeously detailed unpainted minis. Stealth sequences explode into tight action exchanges, optional objectives let you try for “100% sync,” and a cleverly written story adds new wrinkles to the lore. Additional expansions add yet more to explore, from a modern-day infiltration of an Abstergo facility in the Tokyo XXI box, to a competitive twist with the Creed vs. Crows addition. Brotherhood of Venice is unique; it’s a connoisseur’s tabletop game rich in strategy and high-end components, but with rules and gameplay that players of almost any experience level can pick up.

$239 (core box), $71 (expansions, apiece) | *triton-noir.com*



❷ ANIMUS EZIO STATUE

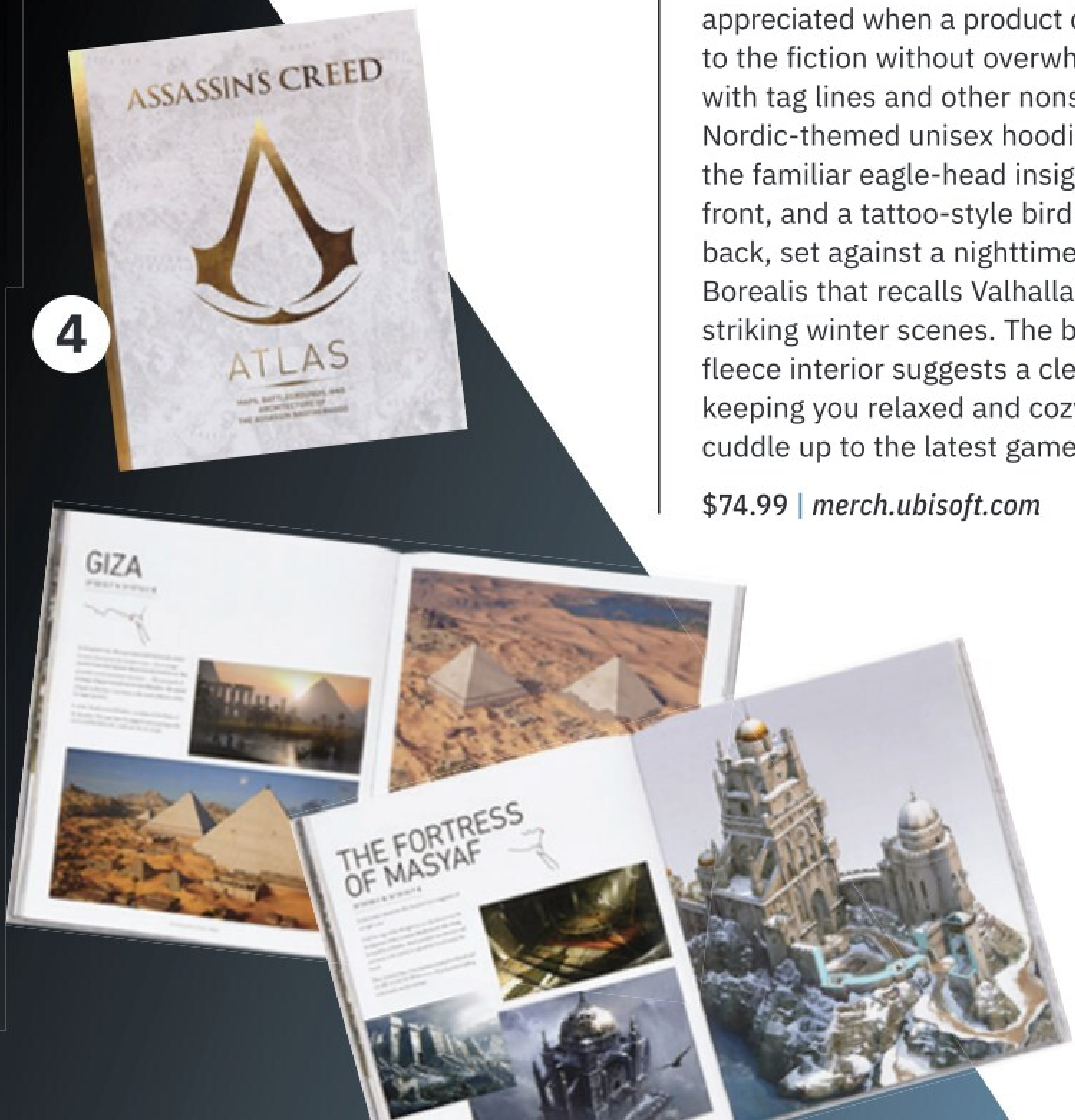
For the most fervent and devoted members of the Brotherhood, this centerpiece statue can be the pride of any collection. Subtle lighting effects perfectly accentuate Ezio Auditore's action pose as he emerges from the Florence Cathedral. The towering 27" tall polyresin statue features exquisite paintwork and sculpting detail, from the church filigree to the cubic visuals of the Animus effect, as if the scene is just coming into focus. Ezio is a clear favorite for many fans, but your showpiece could be one of several statues available from the same collection, from Altaïr to Eivor.

$849 | *purearts.com*

❸ NORDIC HOODIE

Gaming apparel can sometimes be over-the-top with its branding, so it's appreciated when a product offers nods to the fiction without overwhelming with tag lines and other nonsense. This Nordic-themed unisex hoodie features the familiar eagle-head insignia on the front, and a tattoo-style bird on the back, set against a nighttime Aurora Borealis that recalls Valhalla's most striking winter scenes. The brushed fleece interior suggests a clear goal – keeping you relaxed and cozy as you cuddle up to the latest game DLC.

$74.99 | *merch.ubisoft.com*



❹ ASSASSIN'S CREED ATLAS

200 color illustrations fill the pages of this lavish book, which chronicles the places and architecture of the series, from its inception in the Crusades era through the distant past of Ancient Egypt and Greece. The accompanying text links the real world and game series history, charting how the franchise has brought so many historical periods to life in a new way.

$40 | *abramsbooks.com*

❺ NOTRE DAME ART PRINT

The Assassin's Creed franchise has leveraged some of the most talented concept artists working today to create its stunning environments and characters, and Ubisoft's official storefront has a huge selection of art to fill your walls. Pricing varies by item and size, as well as material, from fine art print to museum-quality canvas. Pictured is Notre Dame as it appeared in Unity and as imagined by artist Ludovic Ribardiere, accentuating both the drama of the Assassin character, and the verticality that the series is known for. ■

$24.99 - $299 | *merch.ubisoft.com*

FORGING THE FUTURE OF FANTASY

Taking aspects of the Souls franchise, Bloodborne, and Sekiro, From Software teams up with legendary fiction writer George R.R. Martin to create its biggest, most ambitious title in **ELDEN RING**. Based on almost 10 hours of hands-on action with the game, it's safe to say From has succeeded in creating something incredible.

◆

by
DANIEL TACK

Elden Ring is From Software's latest offering in a line of dark fantasy action-RPG fare that has been continually refined and reinvented since Demon's Souls landed on the PS3 back in 2009. While previous worlds have been immersive and captivating to explore, Elden Ring represents a grandiose shift.

From Software brings everything it's achieved in the last decade of releases into this singular, massive entity that brings the best bits of its previous creations into a vibrant open world. As always, From Software's honed duality of challenge and triumph go hand in hand, and players will find themselves continually tested against brutal opponents and unforgiving environments. With perseverance, any opponent can be felled. However, with the vastness of a gigantic, multi-biome universe to explore, players can enjoy an experience where they won't ever feel that taking on the next titanic enemy is the only course of action at any given time. There are always new secrets to discover and abilities to find.

In addition, From Software has added conveniences that don't interfere with its signature style but take away some frustrations, like adding respawn locations near bosses to help get right back into the battle after death instead of running back under harassment. To me, these games have never been about the perceived difficulty. Instead, they are about the sense of unparalleled adventure through atmospheric environments and the rush of victory that comes with overcoming the impossible.

Join me on a journey that spans close to 10 hours of gameplay, taking me into Limgrave, Stormveil, and the exciting areas beyond. In this adventure, I battle a major boss, learn how traveling the open world makes this unlike any other From Software experience to date, and even get a bit of color from game director Hidetaka Miyazaki himself. Did you know that there are other rather large dungeons mixed in with the gargantuan legacy dungeons and mini caves, coves, and catacombs? Let's explore and learn exactly how Elden Ring works from character creation all the way to the dazzling crystalline backdrop of the game's "second" zone.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** From Software
RELEASE February 25

MAKING MONSTERS OUT OF MEN

Speaking with game director Hidetaka Miyazaki, it's clear that while George R.R. Martin laid out the initial worldbuilding and characters, From has taken it in new directions during this collaboration, including some directions Martin might not expect. "When Martin wrote these characters, and when he provided that origin story and that mythos for the world of Elden Ring, these demigods were much closer to their original form, and maybe closer to human form back then, before the Shattering," says Miyazaki. "So it was more up to us to interpret this and say, 'how did they become such inhuman monsters? And how did the mad taint of the shattered shards of the Elden Ring and its power affect them?' So that was our job to take these grand heroes and sort of misshape them and distort them into something that they're not. And I think if we get a chance to show Martin and if he gets a chance to see the game and see these characters, I think he might be a bit shocked. When he wrote them, he was really envisioning something a little bit more human, a little bit more traditional human drama and fantasy characters. I hope he gets a kick out of that." The process of taking these human, heroic-but-flawed characters and breaking them into grotesque monsters was a lot of fun, Miyazaki said. Miyazaki's favorite character that Martin created is known as Rykard – though we don't have anything else about that one other than the name right now.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

Our journey begins similarly to other From Software games. In the beginning, I'm presented with a class choice and a starting item. The classes in Elden Ring have interesting names and classic archetypes, and it's important to remember that your selection here is merely a selection of starting gear, stat allocations, and abilities – they do not lock you into any particular playstyle for the duration of the game.

There are nine starting load-outs, including a take on "The Deprived" class from Dark Souls, which starts at the lowest level possible, leaving you to build your character entirely as you please. Other classes come with an assortment of spells, gear, and starting Ashes, which are abilities tied to your equipment. These allow players to pick builds without "traditional" magic and still retain some powerful skills. Ashes include a vast assortment of abilities that range from continuous melee attacks, spectacular area-of-effect blasts, buffs, shouts, and more. In Elden Ring, many of these Ashes are modular and can be applied to various armaments, so if you find an ability you enjoy, you may be able to swap it to another item.

This isn't universal swapping across the board, but it should lead to some extreme build diversity compared to From's previous titles. In fact, you can also tweak with the scaling of gear and build perfectly to your tastes. For example, you could potentially make a sword that scales with strength and move it to something else entirely, like dexterity or a magic stat. The degree of customization involved with your armaments and abilities allows you to tinker extensively with your burgeoning bag of options as you move through the game and encourages creativity and experimentation.

I select the Hero class for this play session, a character with a healthy chunk of strength, hit points, and an axe. This is more akin to a barbarian type if we're going by *Dungeons & Dragons* archetypes, but even though I don't plan to use traditional magic, Ash abilities are essential. Before I get going, I also have the opportunity to pick a starting item, which is similar to some of the choices seen in past games, with one possible exception, something called a Stonesward Key. Reading the description states that the key breaks through an Imp's Seal, so this sounds quite different than the other stock beginner gifts. Naturally, I proceed with this choice out of curiosity.

Our story starts with an extensive intro trailer that resonates with From Software's signature expositional narrative style. We're hammered with the fall of Queen Marika, and her demigod offspring vying for the power of the Elden Ring. The situation escalates to The Shattering, a tumultuous and all-encompassing war that had no clear victor. Perhaps the player, a tarnished of no renown, a "dead that yet lives" can become the Elden Lord and claim the great power of the runes and determine the fate of The Lands Between. A "maybe this is going to be a big boss" section of this intro is analogous to other From Software openings where we see some major characters and formidable foes in quick succession, including a loathsome dung eater, a deathbed companion, an all-knowing knight, and a chieftain of the badlands.

After that, I'm placed in a small building to begin the adventure. It's called the Chapel of Anticipation, and there's not a whole lot to do there, with a singular road leading out. The trail leads to another From Software staple, the tutorial boss encounter that you're not really supposed to win. My battle with a giant creature known as a Grafted Scion, a bulbous mass of flesh with numerous appendages that have been stitched on, ends quickly as I die in mere moments. It's probably possible to take this monster down right away for a neat bonus, but the next section likely happens regardless, where I black out and wake up in mucky water at the bottom of a hole. I'm assuming it's possible to find a way back to the Chapel later in the game to take on the Grafted Scion with a more impressive arsenal at my disposal.

Next up is the tutorial segment, which is where many players had a chance to check the game out for the first time during the closed network test. I'm not going to go over every change here, but know that many things appear balanced differently in the final game, and most of the item drops and locations are altered from what was available in the test.

The so-called "tutorial cave" is a quick look to learn controls and accumulate a few runes before you head out into the greater world. And I recommend doing so even as a well-experienced veteran of From's games to get a feel for all these different systems coming together, like stealthing, jumping, and weaving Ash abilities into your standard combat array. At the end of the cave, you encounter what is technically a boss, but it's just a regular soldier. This battle is a bit of an odd anomaly as this soldier goes down in just a few strikes to any build with ease, but it's not a bad idea to dip your toes in the pool before you go swimming.

This section is skippable, and loops back to the game's first checkpoint. Checkpoints in Elden Ring are called Sites of Lost Grace, and they allow the player to perform the vast majority of their critical progression actions. They are numerous, placed all over the map, and fast travel is available at any time, making traversing the open world easy.

You can allocate your critical flasks between health and mana at these sites. While you start the game with only a few flasks, you can obtain more and improve their potency. Near this checkpoint is a shimmering, translucent wall and an imp statue. I noticed this structure in the network test but could not interact with it. However, that has changed, and I can consume my Stonesward Key to open up this area. Doing so reveals a deep, downward passage filled with poison, giant automated chariots with razor wheels and aggressive ghostly humanoids armed with bows and melee weapons.

The automated chariots follow paths down massive corridors, murdering anything in their way – the player must cleverly time their movement from safe alcove to safe alcove to maneuver downward. There's high potential for death here, and after dying a few times, I decide to move on as time is limited and there's a lot to do.

INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

Coming up out of the dark reaches of the Fringefolk Hero's Grave is the first time the scope and scale of the world come into play. A dazzling vista greets the player, full of windswept hills, mountains, clouds, and the shining brilliance of the Erdtree. This scenic, almost pastoral backdrop is one of the highly-differentiated biomes that players will explore.

Each biome features its own unique aesthetic, creatures, monsters, flora, fauna, and more. It's a stark contrast to the dingy hole I've been in and immediately presents the player with a great deal of agency and opportunity. A mysterious masked NPC here offers the player a note of guidance, setting them out on a task to take on the game's "first" big boss in Stormveil Castle, which you can see in the far distance. However, there's so much to explore I doubt many players will hurry in that direction.

In the network test, this area was fun to investigate. Now that I'm in the full game, it's hard to articulate how much better the experience is when there are no limits, no barriers, and pure unbridled exploration for as long as your bravery holds out. During this play session, a considerable number of areas were still off-limits. Still, I was able to explore the game's first biome, Limgrave, with no restrictions, head into the second biome, and peek along the edges of other places I wasn't allowed to go – like the blood-red skies and desert sands of the wastelands to the east. Limgrave itself is huge, and all of its areas, bosses, characters, and more were now open to me. As a zone, Limgrave is loosely divided into sizable chunks, being Western Limgrave, Eastern Limgrave, The Weeping Peninsula, and Stormveil.

But I start by heading to the church nearby, as it is one of the most important starting locations. You may be intimidated by a nearby mounted knight boss, who will likely devastate you at this point in the game, but it's essential to make your way to the ruins of this holy site. At this location, you will be able to upgrade your weapon at a makeshift smithy and purchase valuable items such as your first crafting book and spirit summons.

Crafting consumables can make life significantly easier, and there are resources everywhere, so it's a good idea to pick this core item up as soon as possible; you discover new recipes throughout the game as you find books around the world. As for the smithy, it's a do-it-yourself setup, and your character lacks the skills of a master smith, so you can only upgrade your armaments a little bit. Perhaps we'll find someone else later who can enhance them further.

Soon after, I encounter Melina at another Site of Lost Grace, who acts as our Fire Keeper for this journey. With Melina on our side, I can now level up and allocate stat points at checkpoints. She also gives us access to the magical steed Torrent, which I can summon on demand almost anywhere in the open world, giving me access to high-speed travel, a double jump, and mounted combat.

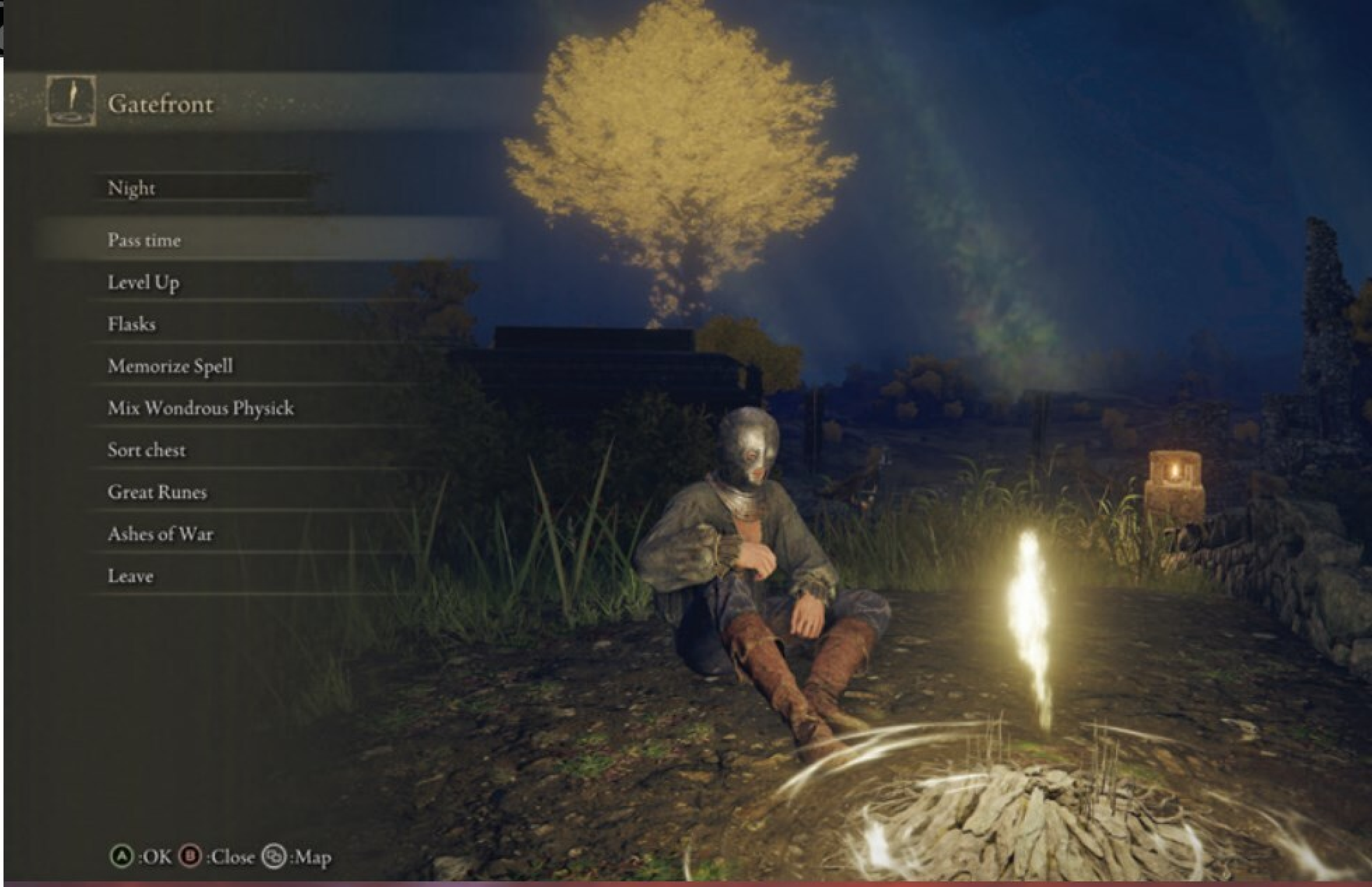
You can't use Torrent in many of the forts, castles, catacombs, mines, and other assorted delves found in the overworld, nor can you summon it inside any sprawling legacy dungeons. That said, Torrent's speed is incredible for getting around the world fast, allowing the player unparalleled exploration abilities. While mounted combat feels a good deal less precise and compelling than From's core melee offerings, it's a great way to approach some enemies (including bosses) outside due to the extreme mobility. Upon receiving Torrent, my immediate inclination was to go everywhere in Limgrave that I couldn't go in the network test.

Also at the church, I meet The Snow Witch, a blue humanoid character with four arms and two faces, one somewhat normal (as normal as it gets for a blue witch) and another spectrally overlapped on the first. You may remember The Snow Witch as the storyteller from one of the latest Elden Ring trailers, and she gives the player the ability to summon spirits. Spirits come in many shapes and sizes, including wolves, magi, skeletons, and even poison-shooting jellyfish. The summons I have access to in this play session are more varied than those available in the network test. They also feel significantly weaker, leaving me to wonder if the versions in the test were upgraded.

While The Snow Witch can't upgrade my spirits and leaves after teaching me how to summon them, another character I meet later is likely to have that capability. Spirits can play a big role in your strategy and give you a significant edge during challenging encounters. But don't become too reliant – there are areas in the game where you cannot summon spirits, and many bosses may have abilities that can destroy spirits almost instantaneously, negating your advantage. While a pack of aggressive melee monsters may be a great choice for one battle to keep tons of pressure on your opponent, another battle may involve huge area-of-effect components that will clear your entire troupe out in moments.

Racing forward with Torrent, I first come to a large pond. The water isn't particularly noteworthy, but the huge bears milling about the area, almost lackadaisically, are of definite interest. One of players' big questions was if the mount would trivialize the nature of exploration, minimizing the apprehension found in other games since they could theoretically just blaze by on the spectral steed. Enemies like this hulking bear put that theory to rest.

While they appear slow and burdensome to the eye, getting near these creatures makes them extremely agitated. They rise and attack with incredible range and speed, enough to surprise an unaware adventurer and knock them off their mount before they even realize they're within striking distance. Being assaulted by one of these ursine monstrosities, I quickly veer off to the south of the trail toward an area known as the Weeping Peninsula.



Map
Gatefront Ruins

THE HORRORS OF CASTLE MOURNE

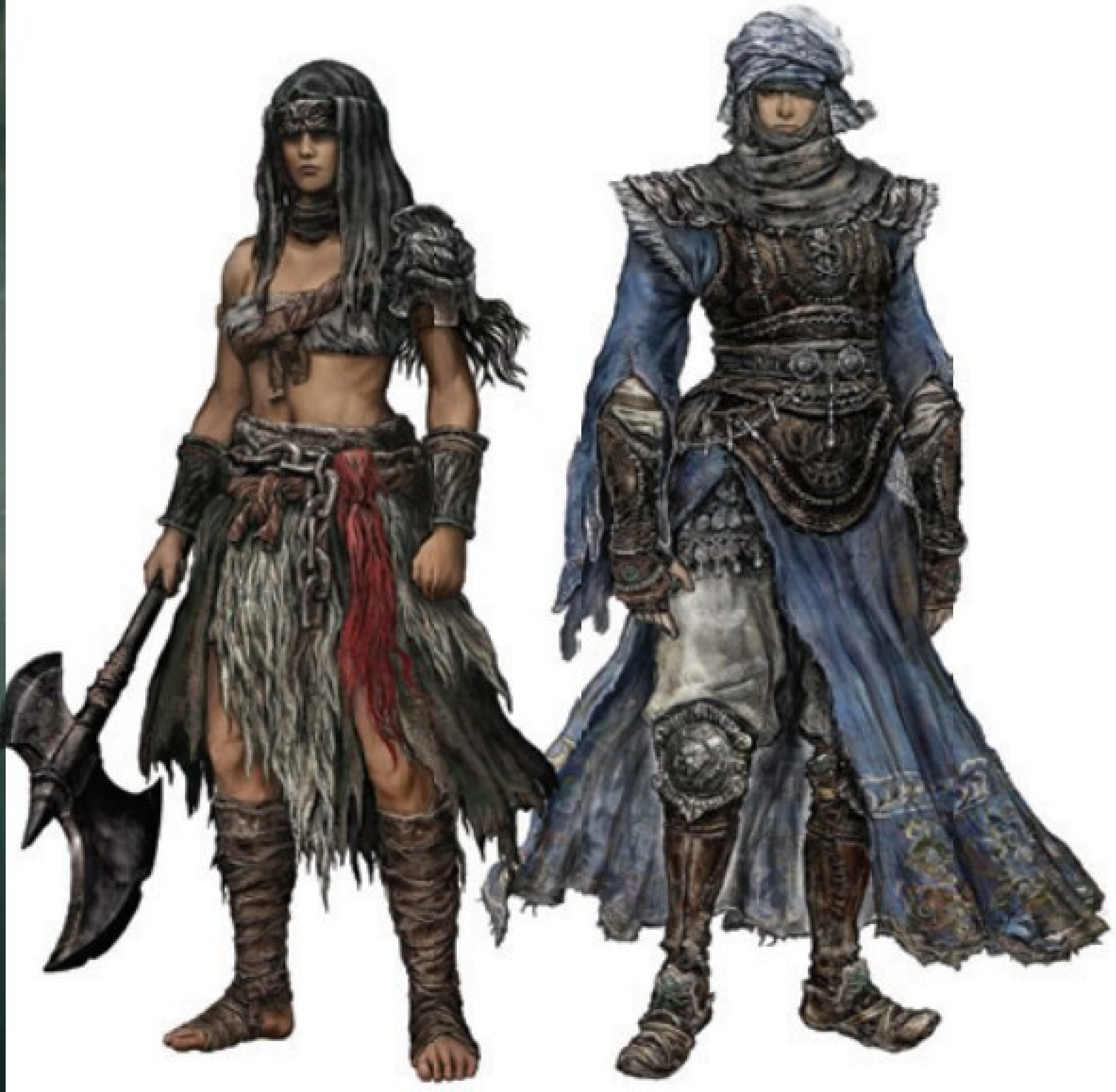
Along the path lies a busy bridge, the Bridge of Sacrifice. Because the approach is full of melee, ranged, and artillery foes, it's a segment that begs the player to either take another route or push through with Torrent's velocity. Beyond the bridge, I meet Irina, who has escaped from a castle to the south. She tells me that Castle Mourne is a place where frightful howls have brought despair and ruin to all its inhabitants. Werewolves, perhaps? It's up to the player if they want to explore and see what happened.

Heading south, I must make my way past a giant forged archer guarding the castle exterior with an enormous bow that functions as a ballista, able to eradicate the player at long range. By hugging the castle wall, it's easy enough to creep up on the enemy from behind and tear him to pieces before he can fire his potent attack. Heading into the castle, it's far worse than Irina implied. Bodies are stacked in heaps; werewolves would have been a walk in the park compared to what has taken over the once-noble house. Instead, we have chimeric beasts that are leonine, featuring snake tails and feathers as well. While they can't take a ton of punishment, they are fast and dish out incredible damage in a matter of moments, so managing them as I move through the castle is important. Castle Mourne is a dungeon in Elden Ring, with multiple checkpoints and a boss within, making it a far more substantial dungeon crawl than a catacomb, cave, or mine, but more minor and less involved than a full-scale legacy dungeon.

Making my way past multitudes of minor chimera-humanoids and a few large ones, I get to a segment that Souls players have seen many times before. I need to carefully place myself to drop down precariously positioned rungs to get to the bottom of a descent, where any misstep equals a lethal fall. At the bottom of this segment are some minor islands leading to a water area and another island that's clearly a boss arena, complete with a traditional fog gate. Inside is our first real challenge.

Bosses have a wide difficulty range in Elden Ring. Small dungeons with only a few rooms have less challenging bosses, and the giant legacy dungeons house difficult encounters. Castle Mourne seems to fall somewhere in the middle, offering a picturesque island duel with the Leonine Half-Breed, who wields a sword and boasts glowing red eyes as he stalks the arena looking for you. This boss features a pounce attack and several ways to gap-close on the player, so taking this boss on as the first thing you do fresh from the Fringefolk Hero's Grave is probably a terrible idea. You'll face more brutal foes later down the road, but this is a good taste of a mid-range encounter that mildly elevates my heart rate.

Having bested the boss, I receive a new weapon, the colossal Grafted Blade Greatsword. Unfortuntately, I don't have the stats needed to wield it for this play session. However, it also comes with a special Ash ability called Oath of Vengeance that raises all of your stats, and also your poise – perfect for a hulking build that's ready to trade blows and hit back with a gigantic, powerful weapon. Castle Mourne is missable, and although the game includes breadcrumbs like Irina's message to try to push the player toward certain large areas, I imagine most players could overlook a significant amount of content on a first playthrough.



Since deadly giant bears are around, I head into a nearby mausoleum with no visible markings. This locale is just a room with an elevator down, which I assume will lead to some kind of mini-dungeon or catacombs. Instead, I get an impressive and jaw-dropping shock as the elevator goes deep into the earth.

As I get to the bottom and look up at the emblazoned purple-tinged, potentially meteoric underworld firmament, I realize this isn't some tiny cavern. This subterranean stretch is huge and potentially has multiple entrance points in the land above. There is, quite literally, an entire realm to explore underneath The Lands Between. The "sky" of the underworld glitters and shimmers like an aurora borealis, and despite being deep underneath the ground, there's no need for torches to see down here.

Underground rivers flow through ruins crawling with aggressive spirits, and as I continue to push through as much as I can, I move into an area called The Eternal City. At this point, I'm simply running as fast as I can through to see as much as possible as more and more phantoms pick up my trail.

Before long, a Bandai Namco representative instructs me that I've seen enough of this area and that I should head back to the lands above. I'm not upset about this – there's an entire world down here that I have no desire to spoil for myself or anyone else. I have many questions about how it connects to the standard environment, but in this play session, the unassuming elevator mausoleum is the only entrance I discover to the great below.

MORE THAN WHAT'S ON THE SURFACE

I'm still far away from making my way to Stormveil to take on the first "legacy dungeon" of the game, huge areas with multiple bosses and checkpoints where the player eventually collects the critical Great Runes in search of the unified Elden Ring. Instead, it's time to go back to bear land and see what I've missed. There's a towering Erdtree around here, identified with a huge marker on the map.

I spot a minor Erdtree outcropping that looks like a small luminescent sapling, and I pull a golden seed from it. Players should keep an eye out for these minor Erdtrees scattered around the world, as they offer up special drops that can improve your flasks. The more you find, the more it takes to improve your flasks, so while initially you may only need a single seed to improve your stockpile, eventually, you'll need more per flask. This system encourages you to scour the world to hunt down as many of these valuable items as you can, potentially even before you take on any bosses, dungeons, or other assorted activities.

In this area, I see my first aetherial candelabra, a small white structure that stands out and summons a ghostly apparition that flits in and out of existence, leaving spectral footsteps as it walks. This is one method that Elden Ring uses to guide you to points in the open world, along with statues that shoot not-so-subtle beams of light at locations when activated. These particular interactions are more involved than spotting something with a spyglass because they force the player to follow the footsteps, possibly for quite some distance and likely through incredibly hostile territory.

EXHILARATING EXPLORATION

While I've taken a pass southward to the Weeping Peninsula, I've primarily ignored most sections of East Limgrave until now. It's important to state that my passes through these areas probably bypassed a ton of content, as there are many major, minor, and cleverly hidden things to find in every area. But with the clock ticking and Stormveil looming in the distance, it is time to press on. Passing through a place in the rugged hills where wolves fall out of the sky to attack me, I hear a familiar voice in the distance. It's a pot stuck in the ground, calling out for help. This is the famous "Pot Boi" who has become a sort of endearing mascot for the game in the lead-up to release.

Pot Boi's real name is Alexander the Iron Fist, and he's a warrior jar. I smack him out of his hole with a couple of well-placed blows, and he thanks me by handing me some Exalted Flesh, which I can snack on to get a temporary boost to physical damage. Alexander tells me that I may want to check out the Redmane Castle to the east, on the edge of the Scarlet Rot-blighted Caelid Wilds. Elden Ring uses friendly NPCs like Alexander to push players toward major landmarks they may miss, and while a trip to Redmane Castle is out of the question on today's trek, it's something I'll remember for the future.

Continuing on my journey, I come to a dilapidated graveyard area, a traditional fantasy setting if there ever was one. Yes, there are skeletons here that come back to life after you knock them down once, so you need to be careful to keep an eye on fallen foes and break those bones down again. Here I meet the enigmatic golden-masked character "D" who holds a bust like he's about to recite some lines from *Hamlet*. D hunts down those who "live in death" and warns us that the village nearby, Summonwater, has been claimed by death. He tells me that a mariner has made its home there. I couldn't wait to see why I should be afraid of a dead sailor, so I immediately set off to the village.

I'm also becoming increasingly aware that many characters I've seen and met in Limgrave have masks, obfuscated faces, or even multiple faces, and I'm trying to piece together if that means anything. Before I can begin theory-crafting too hard, I'm faced with a broken-down town – a few ruined buildings and an enormous shallow lake. In the center of the lake is a small boat, which gives off an eerie lavender glow from a lantern. There's some kind of undead skeletal sailor in the boat and a boss health bar, and orchestral music begins as soon as I approach.

This encounter is with the Bonebeckoner Mariner, who summons an endless tide of skeletal companions that pressure the player. While slow, the boatman and his boat have some dangerous abilities to watch. The mariner can raise the ship and bring it down to cause a crashing wave that does significant damage. He also has a major area-of-effect boat blast where it hits the water with such force that magenta crests of water do severe impact damage to anything around him. As with many From Software bosses, a cool head and careful thinking can help more in this encounter than twitch reflexes. Because the boat slams the shallow pool with such force, any skeleton companions in the mix can also be hit and washed away so a savvy player can manage the tide of undead with careful positioning. I'm quickly annihilated during my first attempt, but I'm back in the battle in mere moments thanks to a nearby Stake of Marika.

Stakes of Marika are positioned worldwide, often in places where you're likely to meet an unfortunate end that aren't close to checkpoints. The player can respawn at Stakes of Marika and get right back into the action, eliminating the once-dreaded "boss run" where the player has to trudge through inconvenient long corridors or elevator rides, while fighting numerous smaller enemies, before getting back into the boss fight flow.

During my second battle with the mariner, I choose to fight with Torrent, dashing around the lake to break up the minion

summons and get out of the way of the boat's reach. While I have an issue getting acclimated to how my weapon swings on horseback, it makes the fight considerably more manageable. The mariner falls, the lake is free of its undead pestilence, and I walk away with a spiffy new Skeletal Militiamen spirit summon and a piece of Deathroot. The Deathroot states that Beast Clergymen seek it out. I have no idea what this means right now, but that's okay because I'm ready to keep exploring.

From a nearby cliffside, I can barely make out the silhouette of someone in the distance, standing atop a chunk of ruin. Carefully making my way down the ledges, I meet an arrogant man named Kenneth Haight, who claims to be next in line as the ruler of Limgrave. However, there's just one problem: His fort has been overrun, and he needs someone to clean out the riff-raff.

Haight promises rewards and a festival should I complete the task, so I set off to the fort to clean things up. It's pretty far, but some fast travel gets me there. Fort Haight is a mini-dungeon of sorts, with a lot of action focused on taking on bigger-sized opponents and troops simultaneously, but there's no big boss battle or arena. Instead, expect to clean out enemies who love throwing bombs, attacking in multiples from awkward angles, and keeping pressure on the player. Atop the fort in a conspicuous chest also lies a curious item, half of a special crescent item that has no discernable purpose – for now.

Clearing the fort, I head to the nearest checkpoint outside and set the time to early morning, ensuring that time has passed since I did the deed. At any checkpoint in Elden Ring, you can rest until certain times of day, from early morning to the dead of night. While we don't know too much about this system yet, certain special enemies only show up at night and the passage of time may be needed to set NPCs into action.

Kenneth is pleased that I've cleaned up his house and tells me that he's going to return to his fort. I head back, expecting to see a festival in my honor roaring, but sadly Haight is done talking to me for now, as the next step of this quest chain isn't available in the build I'm playing. However, it illustrates some of the exciting potential for world-altering throughout the game, so I remain intrigued as I set off, finally, toward Castle Stormveil.

Picking up the pace

Stakes of Marika don't take anything away from the intensity of boss battles, but they do alleviate some of the pacing and tempo issues players may have had during certain boss runbacks in previous From Software games.

"We had these areas where it was becoming a little bit tedious or ruining the pacing, ruining the general flow of adventuring to go all the way back to these sites of grace. We wanted something that would alleviate this poor pacing, having to trudge back these long distances," says game director Hidetaka Miyazaki. "So through playtesting, we found where these areas were, and we found we needed something to combat them. The Stakes of Marika resulted from that discussion. We have to be careful not to add too many because adventuring could feel a little bit lukewarm when you've always got a respawn point to fall back on. So it's a careful balancing process."

A MAGICAL HUB OF ACTIVITY

Storms ravage the path to the castle, and I seek shelter in a worn-down shack just off the side of the road. Here I meet Roderika, who tells me she's scared of what's happening in the castle, with people's limbs "being taken and attached to the spider." The spider, incidentally, sounds a lot like the Grafted Scion I fought at the beginning of the game. I also get the feeling Roderika has a more critical role to play in this tale than just hanging out in a forgotten hovel. For now, she leaves me with a spirit jellyfish summon, a somewhat fragile ranged attacker that can poison opponents with its attack.

The road heads straight to the castle, but instead, I decide to head northward, up a winding and somewhat obscured trail. Here's where things get even more fascinating. Somehow, I've made my way to the next biome – one that many assumed would require "completing" Stormveil Castle. However, one little tucked away mountainside trail allows me to bypass the area altogether. Arriving at a checkpoint on the outskirts of the new location, I make ready to explore but get a surprise when I sit down to rest. My companion Melina arrives and whisks me away to a magical place, the Roundtable Hold.

The Roundtable Hold is Elden Ring's hub area, where you'll meet tons of NPCs, use special services and upgrades, and maybe even get into some serious trouble. There are tons of characters to meet here even on your first visit, continuing to add to my prediction that this game contains more characters and dialogue than possibly all other modern From Software action/RPGs combined. While the hub is tightly condensed, closed doors and blocked-off spaces indicate that there's more to the Roundtable Hold than meets the eye.

The Roundtable Hold exists outside of space and time and cannot be found on the world map – the only way to access it is via fast travel to the majestic center checkpoint. This is a gathering place for tarnished champions that are guided by grace – kind of like yourself. This fantastic place begs for thorough exploration, a bit of a mix between Arthurian and Bloodborne aesthetics. In the center room where I arrive, I meet Corhyn, a holy practitioner who can teach me practical faith-based skills. While I haven't built my character for any kind of casting, I could still pick up a cheap Urgent Heal spell if I feel like it.

An armor-clad noble here named Diallos is looking for a loyal servant to his house called Lanya. Roderika, the woman I met in the hut on the Stormveil approach, also stands around the table and tells me that she's here trying to find a purpose for her existence. There's also a rather surly elder who seems to be some combination of annoyed and amused with my arrival to the hold but doesn't have much else to say to me right now. D, the enigmatic undead hunter, is here and offers to give us the location of a notable Beast Clergyman to meet, marking our map in red.

The central hold room gives way to multiple adjacent rooms, so I also begin checking them out. I hear the all-too-familiar clanking of a blacksmith's hammer as I move into one. This is the fairly large Blacksmith Hewg, who can upgrade weapons well beyond the capabilities of the do-it-yourself setup at the initial church, assuming I have the materials. Curiously enough, Hewg is a prisoner of the Roundtable Hold, chained to the wall. While I inquire about the state of his captivity, he declines to elaborate, and instead, I get some new questioning options regarding Roderika. Upon asking, Hewg states that Roderika has a gift for spirit tuning that she hasn't become cognizant of yet. While I'm not able to activate this option during my play session, I'm assuming that Roderika becomes the source to upgrade and enhance spirit summons in the game.

There's a closed door and a silent figure leaning up against the wall in an adjoining room. While he won't talk to me, he does give me an emote for interacting with him, one that lets me execute my own nonchalant wall-lean. A bit further down the hall, I find a room containing "The Two Maiden Husks" which are two dried-out and rather gruesome characters that can take bell bearings from me for some purpose. I did not find any bell bearings, nor do I know the rewards from this system, so my curiosity is piqued moving on to one of the Hold's other rooms.

A woman named Fia asks to embrace me in one room – apparently a sacred act. As I select yes, I make the connection that this must be the same Fia from the opening intro trailer, the "deathbed companion." Fia's embrace gives me a consumable known as Baldachin's Blessing, which I can use to buff my poise. I can only carry one of these at a time, but Fia indicates that I can come back at any point to receive her blessing. Melee builds looking for another tool to burn off some focus points in place of the magical arts would probably benefit by having one of these around for tough fights.

Just off the main room of the hold is a large area that seems inaccessible unless I jump down from a balcony. Of course, I do. Immediately I see there are bloodstains all over, which doesn't bode well. I'm attacked by an NPC invader, a Frenzy-Tongue. This adversary wields a scythe, has extremely high mobility, and boasts incredibly powerful frost magic. After landing a few heavy

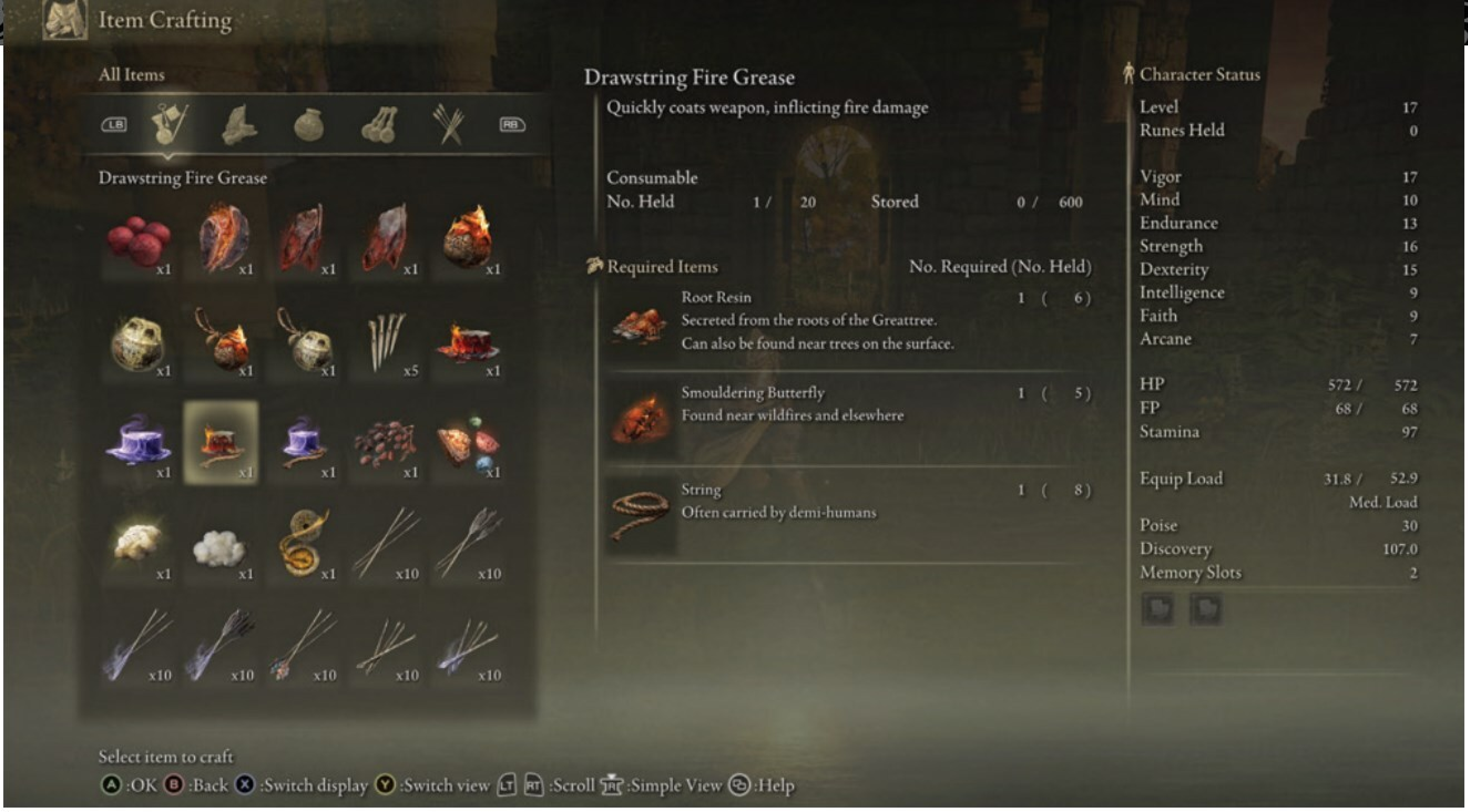
attacks on them and watching it barely take a nub out of their substantial hit-point pool, I accepted my dire fate. There are some nifty secrets and rewards down there, but this isn't the right time. After upgrading my troll club a few times at my new blacksmith friend, I take my leave of Roundtable Hold for now.

A TUMULTUOUS, TWISTED ASCENT

At long last, it's time to approach Stormveil Castle. Yes, I have the option of going right to the "second" biome, but let's see what this place is all about. I have to defeat the wily Margit the Fell Omen to gain entry. This boss was available in the network test and can be a decent challenge, especially when the player may face them. Still, it's important to note that the open nature of this game ensures that no player will have the same experience.

Margit would be much easier if I explored all of Limgrave and the many other areas accessible already. Even so, mobbing him with a pack of spirit wolves and using my previous experience with his somewhat limited moveset makes short work of him. Upon defeat, Margit the Fell Omen drops a Talisman Pouch that confers a talisman slot, a permanent player enhancement. Talisman slots in Elden Ring work similarly to ring slots in previous Souls games, so having as many as possible is a good idea. With my additional Talisman slot, I now equip one that makes me more resistant to physical damage and one that resists fire. A wide assortment of talismans can be found, so it's nice to have a mix to swap, especially for certain circumstances that call for specific resistances, maneuverability, or damage.

Now I choose to approach the Stormveil Castle via several different paths and directions. The castle is labyrinthine and large, and there are quite a few routes to take and get lost. Even though the direct route to the final boss is easy enough to find once you know the way, it takes quite some time to make it through the castle's many quirks and mysteries. Even then, I certainly didn't find everything. The addition of jumping gives even more directions to explore as I find myself hopping over parapets and rooftops, sometimes quite precariously, in search of new checkpoints, monsters, and even some relatively safe areas of interest that include new NPCs to meet and greet.



Drawstring Fire Grease
Quickly coats weapon, inflicting fire damage

Consumable
No. Held 1 / 20 Stored 0 / 600

Required Items	No. Required (No. Held)
Root Resin Secreted from the roots of the Greattree. Can also be found near trees on the surface.	1 (6)
Smouldering Butterfly Found near wildfires and elsewhere	1 (5)
String Often carried by demi-humans	1 (8)

Character Status		
Level		17
Runes Held		0
Vigor		17
Mind		10
Endurance		13
Strength		16
Dexterity		15
Intelligence		9
Faith		9
Arcane		7
HP	572 /	572
FP	68 /	68
Stamina		97
Equip Load	31.8 /	52.9
		Med. Load
Poise		30
Discovery		107.0
Memory Slots		2

Select item to craft
A :OK B :Back X :Switch display Y :Switch view LT RT :Scroll :Simple View :Help

I meet the gatekeeper near the castle entrance, who warns me that I should take the side route through a broken castle wall to avoid the hellish army that awaits beyond the main gate. Even if you don't plan to head through the main entrance now, both paths are viable and contain many secrets – and even feed into each other at various points, so you may as well open both routes by requesting the gate to be opened. Like many other inhabitants of this land, the gatekeeper has no love for Godrick and would love to see someone come in and remove him.

One of my first forays onto the castle grounds takes me to a grafted lion. Not a half-lion humanoid, like the one in Castle Mourne, but an actual giant lion that's had swords chained and grafted to its hulking body. This monster sets the pace for some masterful environmental storytelling that Stormveil Castle sets up and delivers on. From this ruined beast to eagles with razor talons that are actual razor knives, the ghoulish aforementioned spiderlike Grafted Scion, and rooms full of hanging limbs, the player experiences the story of grafting and Godrick's obsession with appendages around every corner. Butchery takes on a whole new element in this kingdom as body parts are ripped and attached to other organisms to make new and monstrous creations with varying degrees of success. There are no audio tapes to find or laborious journals to look over; the tale of Godrick's grisly reign is conveyed to the player through grotesque discoveries throughout the grounds.

Past this creature lies a path outside the castle to a broken bridge, full of massive forged soldiers. Rather than battle them, I run to the very end of the bridge, where several ledge drop-offs unveil something downright bizarre, a tiny glowing purple portal. I interact with the doorway, sending me to another location across Limgrave, a previously inaccessible point far along a giant bridge.

I arrive at the Divine Tower of Limgrave, leading me to believe there are Divine Towers in other biomes (and the map reinforces this theory with a similar-looking space in the second area). However, the giant doors to this tower are blocked shut. If I had the other half of the crescent icon that I pulled out of the fort, I might be able to open it and... ascend to the heavens? If we can go beneath The Lands Between, is it possible to climb above them as well? There are many hints that such a thing may be possible, including plenty of architecture strewn about Limgrave that looks like it may have fallen from the sky, but it's a puzzle that will have to wait for another time.

Luckily, I can port back into Stormveil and continue heading through the castle. My journey takes me to an area hinging around a tremendous central elevator, and you unlock various routes to come back to it from different positions as you explore. My trek takes me to a horrible basement next to a macabre kitchen where one of those vicious grafted balls of flesh and sinew patrols.

There are many enemies here, limbs everywhere, and even a giant troll bled out and strung up; this is not a happy place. However, exploring upward, along the walls and roof areas of the castle proves just as lethal in other ways, with birds that toss explosive barrels and blast fire. Throughout the castle, I must continue to be wary of soldiers with horns, which they can blow to alert huge swathes of enemies to abruptly mob me. The castle also features intimidating knight enemies clad in heavy armor and shields. These opponents can spin powerful wind gusts with their swords and attack for colossal damage, making them one of the most threatening assailants yet. There's a small chapel I discover within the castle where the friendly Sorcerer Rogier hangs out. Rogier sells a handful of spells if you're looking to round out your arsenal of abilities.

GODRICK THE GRAFTED

As I continue to ascend the castle, I also note another Imp Vessel here I can activate with a Stonesword Key, making me think that these keys function as consumables to find special items much like the Pharros Lockstones in Dark Souls II. In one curious chamber, I discover a painting that I collect. This discovery is the first of several paintings I find in my play session, which depict a specific location in the world. The description of the item states that I may find the artist's spirit if I go to the area shown in the painting, tying these paintings to exploration, memory, and map mastery. I also run into a small contingent of pot creatures. Unlike our friend Alexander, these pots are hostile and attack me on sight. The large pot in the group features a spinning whirlwind-style attack that inflicts significant damage, so it's unwise to underestimate these vessels. There's a ton more to explore and discover in the castle, but eventually, the journey takes me to Godrick the Grafted, a signficant challenge, and a demigod lord.

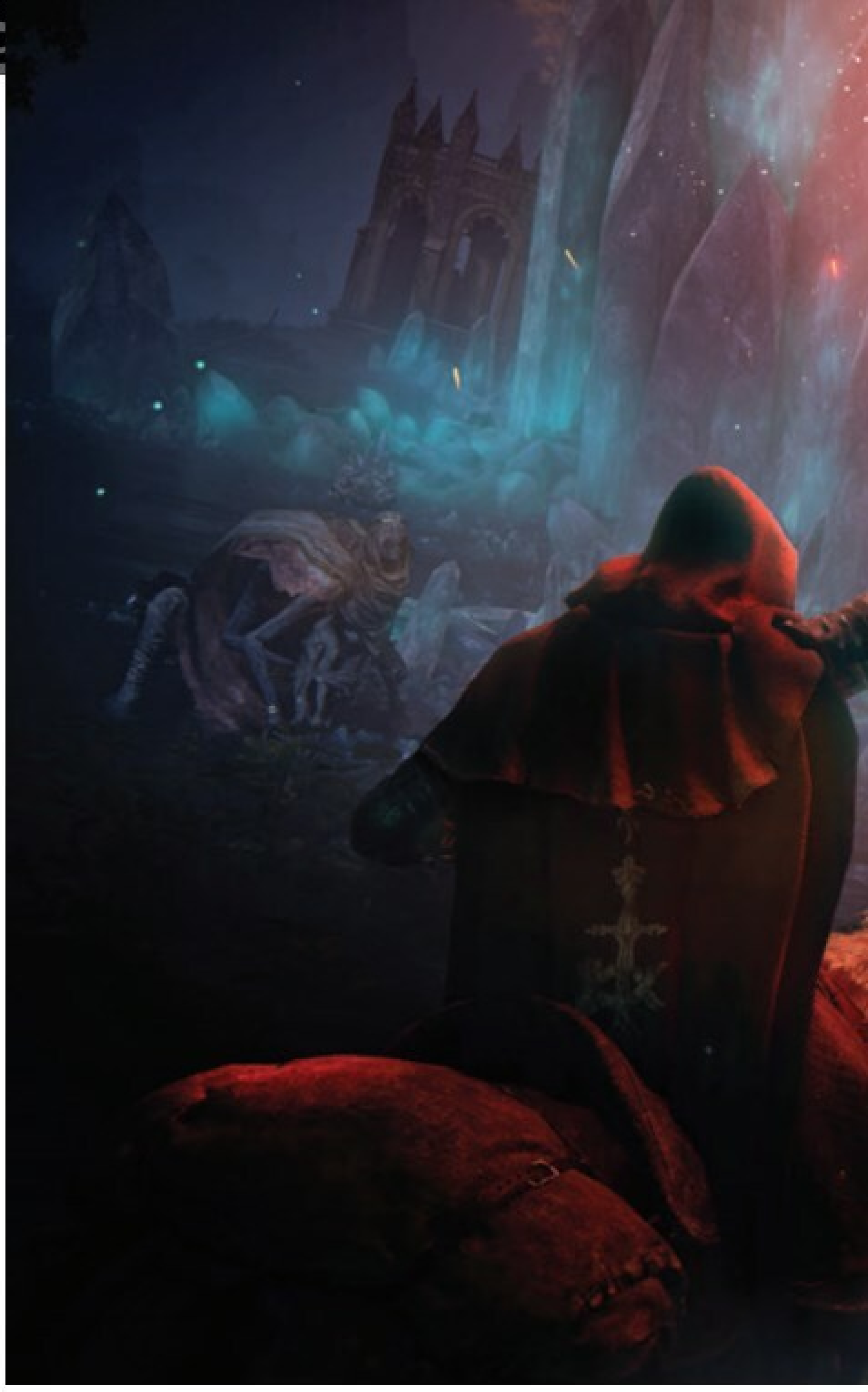
Godrick boasts a truly astonishing number of attacks, so much that even after attempting the battle well over a dozen times, I was still seeing new abilities or mixups on known skills. Even worse, many of these skills were able to kill me in just a few hits. Godrick does have windows of opportunity, and learning them and exploiting those scant chances to get in for damage is critical, depending on when you choose to engage this twisted king and his many arms.

My attempts on Godrick took place around character level 20, and a Bandai Namco representative said that From Software expects players to take him on around level 40. If you were expecting spirit summons to trivialize this encounter, that's not the case with what I had available. Godrick has such powerful skills that whatever you choose to bring into the fray can be slain almost instantaneously, though Roderika and spirit tuning may be able to alter this.

My early strategies attempted to ping-pong Godrick back and forth from my spirit jellyfish summon, keeping its attention up close so that it could squirt a poison payload at the corrupt king to continually tick down his massive health bar. However, whenever I would mess up the back-and-forth dance for even a second, Godrick could crush my little friend with just a few attacks. Instead, the spirit summon I eventually settle on is the Skeletal Militiamen, who can come back to life after dying – making them a great option for an extended encounter.

Godrick is a tricky foe with a packed arsenal of animations, and taking him down is no easy feat. Halfway through the fight, Godrick decides to graft a dragon head to his arm, adding even more moves to his arsenal including a grab attack, flames from above, and a flamethrower assault that needs to be avoided carefully. It would have been a far better use of time and energy to go exploring and come back with some new tools, but I dug in, and after twenty or so attempts, Godrick the Grafted was bested. It's a hell of a fight and a considerable test. For an early game big boss, this indicates that the antagonists later on in this game will match or exceed the quality of epic From battles like Nameless King, Sister Friede, and Darkeater Midir.

With Godrick defeated, I obtain a Great Rune and a Remembrance of Godrick. You can consume the Remembrance for a large chunk of runes, but I also assume that this is the equivalent of a "boss soul" and that it can somehow be transposed or altered into a weapon, armor, or magic down the line. For a little bit of additional flavor, the gatekeeper from the beginning of the dungeon shows up and stomps on Godrick's fallen head, talking a lot of smack and asking him what a big bad leader he is now, eh? I hope with my victory the people in Stormveil will stop slicing people apart and attaching organs, but we'll see what happens.



THE SUNKEN REALM

The next chapter takes me to the area I came to earlier up through the concealed mountain path. I'm told that I'm only allowed to look around for 30 minutes once I enter this zone. This biome is a huge change from Limgrave. The areas around the magical academy Raya Lucaria are steeped in bold blues instead of lush greens. A soft layer of fog envelops much of the mostly shallow water area, with glistening crystals everywhere. All new enemies occupy this place, far unlike the trolls, humans, and wolves of Limgrave.

My initial foray into the wetlands has me placing a marker on the map to lead me to the area's stele monument, a stone structure that houses a map fragment that will reveal the area's topography to me. Without map fragments, exploration is still possible, but knowing the region around you is immensely helpful, especially when entering new territory. Almost immediately, I'm waylaid by packs of roving primate warriors armed with crude bone implements and displaying war paint. Trails don't seem to exist in the middle of the damp, so I veer off to the right where there's a stone structure to help get my bearings.

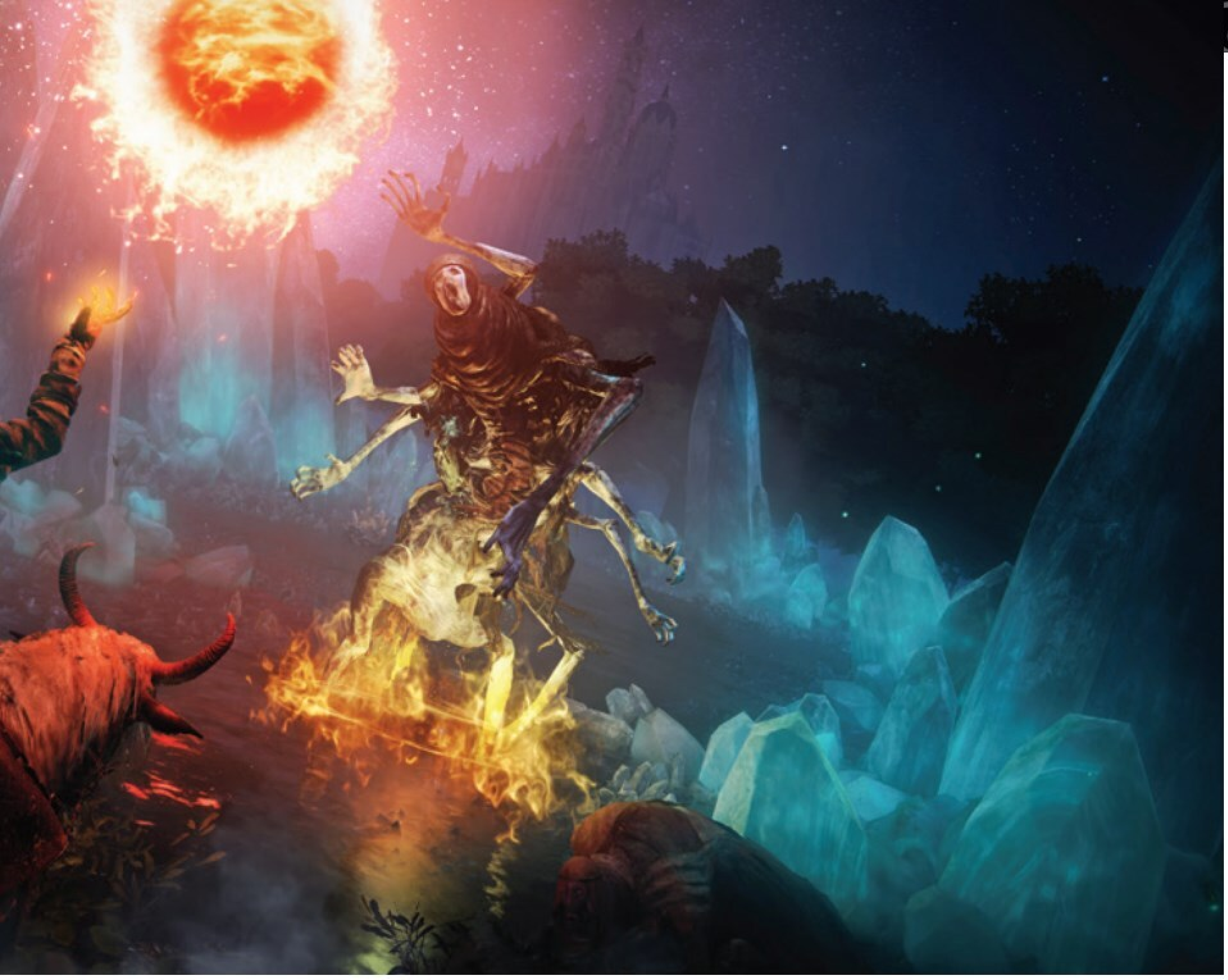
Something immense strikes my eye out in the distance, a shimmering blob; naturally, I begin moving toward it. It's actually a giant lobster, and it's not very happy to see me and starts aggressively moving in my direction. Since I'm on Torrent, I assume outrunning this sea cockroach will be easy, but it's disturbingly speedy in closing the gap between us. I run a few routes around some stone structures, trying to shake it off my tail, and to my shock and horror, the lobster squirts some kind of acid that crumbles the stone barriers before my very eyes.

I head in another direction, taking me out of the splish-splash of the shallow water and onto a green field. The field has multiple giant metal goblin heads, some upright and some half-buried, making me wonder if this area was once submerged and where these things came from and what their purpose was. These objects seem far more technology-inclined than anything I've seen in the game to this point, with what looks like a cannon poking out of the exaggerated goblin grin.

Passing through this field of strange oddities, I press on, making my way inside a

a penchant for poison

Challenges in From Software games don't just come from battling bosses. While the environments in Elden Ring are breathtaking and beautiful, players should prepare for the worst as they traverse one of director Hidetaka Miyazaki's signature environmental challenges – the poison swamp. "While making this game I rediscovered my love for making poison swamps," Miyazaki says. "I know how people feel about them but I suddenly realize I'm in the middle of making one and I can't help myself. It just happens. It's the visuals and atmosphere of these poison swamps, I love to make them so much and I hope you can look forward to this poisoned swamp with a brand new identity." Also in terms of Elden Ring specifically, players can expect to see a new special kind of affliction separate from poison or toxic known as the Scarlet Rot.



crystal cave. The cave is full of this region's crystals, including crystals on enemies. I'm attacked by snails covered in crystallized structures that shoot more crystals, dishing out potent ice damage. This cave is larger than the others I've seen and includes multiple paths and an area deep below that I can see but can't discern how to get down. Given that my clock is ticking, I move on from the cave and head north to a breathtaking sight.

Here, the shallows become the deeps, and I'm forced to travel atop half-submerged buildings amidst all manner of sea life. Yes, there are giant enemy crabs here. There are also turtle warriors that would almost be adorable if they didn't come with a bunch of different weapons and travel in packs. Balloons sail high above the waterline. Wildly different from anywhere else I've been, this area conveys considerable sea energy mixed with magical wonder. It's a beautiful sight, and high above lies where I'm trying to get to, Raya Lucaria Academy. Ostensibly, this is the next huge legacy dungeon. I get another taste of From's masterful environmental storytelling during the approach.

Those discarded goblin-headed structures resting gently in the field of grass earlier? I get an up-close and way too personal look heading up to Raya Lucaria as I see these powerful war machines in action, able to bellow fire out of their mouths. Dodging a veritable army as I ascend the steps up to the academy, I'm not entirely shocked to see that the main door is inaccessible – I'll need to find a glintstone key to enter. Knowing that my time in this realm is almost up, I check the map to find one more area of interest to hit before the buzzer, but I also take a few moments to appreciate the breathtaking ambiance of this area, where the brilliant blues have reached an apex and been combined with magical lighting and flair. This realm is a place where magic happens, I am quite sure of that. And looking around at what's happened to the region, not all of this magic is of pure intent.

THE ROAD GOES EVER ON

In almost 10 hours with the game, I feel I have barely scratched the surface of what the world has to offer, and much more happened on the adventure that I simply don't have room to relay. While I still have to play the final game, if this session is any indicator, Elden Ring may turn out to be From Software's best game, and an incredible triumph beyond measure. In this enthralling adventure, fascinating discoveries await around every turn. ■

Check out GameInformer.com/EldenRing for additional information from our chat with Hidetaka Miyazaki, exclusive video, gameplay takeaways, and more!

a concealed cache

Elden Ring includes some elements that From Software acolytes will undoubtedly be pleased to see, some harkening back all the way to Demon's Souls or even King's Field. The ever-duplicitous Patches character is in the game, so be certain to keep your eye on him if you wish to listen to his tales, as he's always ready to stab you in the back at the first opportunity. Alongside Patches are some other fan-favorites, including the powerful sought-after swords Storm Ruler and Moonlight Greatsword. "I can confidently say yes that they will be in the game," director Hidetaka Miyazaki. "I felt like I was entitled to include these things this time, so you will find them if you look hard enough." However, there won't be any Painted World to explore, as that is something that Miyazaki feels is particular to Dark Souls.

RIDDLE WRAPPED IN A MYSTERY

The long build-up is over as the series' most tantalizing villain makes her play in Destiny 2: The Witch Queen

BY MATT MILLER

IT'S TIME FOR THE PAYOFF. For years, Bungie has teased the potential of Destiny's most devious villain. In recent months, that tease has escalated. The Hive queen named Savathûn has infiltrated all the major storylines, insinuating herself into the events shaping the story. Now, at long last, the Witch Queen's trap is sprung, as she co-opts humanity's most precious resource – the Light that gives power to its Guardians – and uses that power to make deathless warriors of her own.

With The Witch Queen, Bungie is betting big on a narrative twist that's been in the making for a long time and using that storytelling moment to push forward new twists on the long-established gameplay model, including a dramatic move toward playstyle customization for players. On the eve of the expansion's release, we spoke with the project's creative director and got the scoop on what longtime players, lapsed Guardians returning to the fold, and even newcomers can expect to discover in the next few months.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Stadia • PC
STYLE Online Multiplayer Shooter **PUBLISHER** Bungie
DEVELOPER Bungie **RELEASE** February 22

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"The villain, Savathûn, the most cunning Hive foe that we've ever had, is front and center," says creative director James Tsai. "And it would not be a Savathûn story if there were no trickery. She is the god of cunning." That focus on treachery, hidden meanings, and secrets doesn't end because Savathûn has now revealed her true identity and stepped into the light. And it sounds like a primary focus of The Witch Queen experience is matching wits against such a wily foe. "We've actually been talking about this as a mystery," Tsai continues. "The player fantasy is one of being like a psychic detective this time around. You're going into this uncertain destination, this creepy, beautifully grotesque, twisted Wonderland kind of place. What's the mystery here? What can you trust?"

Those dynamics of beautiful grotesquerie are on full display in the playspace that Tsai is describing. Savathûn's Throne World is a sprawling new area for players to explore, filled with secrets and opportunities for combat across several distinct regions. A reflection of Savathûn's mind, the Throne World is an old Hive Realm that is being remade and blessed by the Light that Savathûn has stolen. "She has the Light, so she has this opulent, well-manicured castle. Cool sculptures, courtyards. It's not the typical Hive area. Then you have this swampier, bayou kind of area that she has not yet rebuilt with the Light. And then there's this underworld section as well." There's even a new six-person matchmade activity called Wellspring that plays out in the Throne World, built to convey the fantasy of storming the seemingly insurmountable castle. Conceptually, the swamps, heat, and humidity represent something novel and distinct from what we've previously seen from the franchise.

Across that new landscape, Bungie has big plans to make the new campaign especially memorable. "We call it the definitively Destiny campaign," Tsai says. "It's about bringing some of the awesome grandeur of some of our endgame aspirational feel into the campaign itself. Soaring through these really cool environmental setpieces. Memorable encounters that take a lot of thought and understanding. Bringing puzzles into the campaign for players. There's a really reinvigorated focus on the campaign in this release."

The campaign's renewed importance also means new ways to play. Beyond the classic experience, players can confront a legendary version of the campaign. That translates into more enemies with more significant health pools, increased modifiers on combat, and tweaks to Darkness zones that ensure players can't trivialize encounters. In return, players can expect commensurate rewards with gear bundles that help push your Guardian into raid-readiness, upgrade modules, and even the possibility of exotic drops.

The legendary campaign also features a new approach to fireteam size, adapting content and enemies depending on the number of Guardians in your playgroup. "Our intent is to make sure that there is no wrong way to play this," Tsai says. "You want to play it by yourself; you're doing it. You want to play with friends? You'll get the same tough experience and that same accomplishment."

Whether in classic or legendary difficulty, players should expect one significant challenge to remain constant – the dire threat of the Lucent Brood. While players will still face the entire coterie of Hive enemies they've fought for years, Savathûn's forces are joined by new variants empowered by the Light. Like player character Guardians, the Lucent Brood wield supers and rise back from the dead after defeat. "It really does change the sandbox experience against them," Tsai says. "It's not just like fighting a set of Hive with new pajamas; you have to take these abilities into consideration."

Players can expect to confront newly empowered Knights glowing with Void shields like a Titan. Arc-powered Wizards fling out electrical attacks. And solar-fueled Acolytes wield fans of flaming knives. Upon death, these high-threat enemies remain dormant for a few seconds until their Ghosts bring them back to life and full health, ready to continue the fight. Your only option is to risk closing the distance to the enemy Ghost and then tapping your Finisher to grasp and crush them, ending the threat.

Meanwhile, more standard Hive enemies will get powered up by moths that infuse them with Light. "So, you might fight an Acolyte who is charged with Light, and when you defeat that Acolyte, then the moth comes flying out, and it seeks to infuse its power into another one of the nearby combatants, or it comes after you and tries to detonate," Tsai explains. Add up the implications, and battles against the Lucent Brood aim for high-intensity encounters that require up-close confrontations to end the fight definitively.

To increase your chance of survival, Guardians have a few new tricks of their own. The glaive appears in both exotic and legendary varieties and acts as a combo melee and ranged weapon with significant potential for destruction. "It's our first new weapon archetype in the game since bows, and it's the only first-person melee weapon we have," Tsai says. Unlike the sweeping arcs of swords, the glaive is squarely targeted at single foe engagement. Aggressive jabs can be strung together with multiple button presses to produce a fluid combo. A glaive can also shoot out an energy blast at short or medium range and features a defensive shield that powers up as you defeat enemies.

Glaives are just one of the many weapons you can build and tweak with the new weapon crafting system. This complex new system fulfills a desire many Destiny players have voiced for years: a chance to devise their own custom arsenals, modifying weapons to support a personal playstyle. Weapon crafting starts with a pattern, which can be used to create the initial form of a given weapon. Using that weapon in combat gains levels that enable you to further tweak its capabilities, from intrinsic properties like a ranged or handling increase, to magazine attributes and other more consequential adjustments. Eventually, you'll be able to alter its core traits and perks, like Rampage or Killing Wind. You're also gathering crafting resources, both through distinct sources out in the game world, as well as by dismantling other weapons. Optional consumable mementos even let you unlock cosmetic changes to your weapons.

All of these weapon changes are enabled through the use of the Relic, both to create and subsequently customize your perfect tool of destruction. It's a new focus for investment in the game and personalization of your experience, and it's treated as such – a designated place you visit that features numerous options for making a given weapon your own. "The reason we have this relic is that we wanted this to feel like a personal, sacred, and emotionally intimate moment for you and give it some importance in the universe," Tsai says.

The Witch Queen is also set to see a further push toward play customization through revising the Void subclasses. That retrofit is the first such reorganization of Light-based subclasses planned for the year, with both Arc and Solar intended for rollout in later seasons. To get a sense of what to expect, look no further than the recent launch of the Darkness-based Stasis powers, with their aspects and fragments that let players reshape their approach to play. When applied to the Void classes, players shouldn't expect entirely new power arrays. Instead, it's about mixing and tweaking the existing power trees to build-craft the exact character you want. "We really feel it is a big quality of life improvement for those Light subclasses, being able to just optimize the way that you play," Tsai says.

After a significant delay that pushed The Witch Queen into the new year, Destiny 2 players have high expectations for a refresh that invigorates the long-running hobby game. While the full scope of that refresh won't be apparent until weeks into the new expansion, it's safe to say that Bungie has a clear plan ahead for continued evolution. After all, The Witch Queen is just the first in a line of named expansions already in the books. But before that final shape can coalesce, the complete picture of Savathûn's deceptions and trickery must come to light, and those developments have the attention of a rapt fanbase. ■

QUICK TAKE

Destiny 2 helped fill the void of social interaction caused by the pandemic. With the addition of crossplay last year, multiplayer sessions with even more friends became possible. Late nights chasing weekly pinnacles and raid rewards were great ways to distract from the difficult reality outside. Bungie has been doing great work with in-game storytelling, and I'm excited to see the story continue in The Witch Queen.

- MÓNICA REXACH ORTIZ

OUR MOST ANTICIPA GAMES

ATED

OF
2022
AND
BEYOND

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New-gen platforms have hit their stride, and we're thrilled about the months of gaming in front of us. We're starting the year off right, with a look at precisely which games have us most excited. Beyond upcoming titles releasing around the time you read this, like Horizon Forbidden West and Dying Light 2: Stay Human, and games we're highlighting elsewhere in this issue, like Elden Ring and Destiny 2: The Witch Queen, we've selected 50 additional games we can't wait to play. Read ahead to learn which games are drawing our most focused attention and why those titles are set to reshape the gaming landscape in the near future.

STAR WARS ECLIPSE

A new era for Star Wars gaming

With the conclusion of the Skywalker Saga movies, Star Wars fiction has been moving into new territories and time periods to open new avenues of storytelling. While many fans have been following TV projects like *The Mandalorian* and *The Book of Boba Fett*, other promising efforts have been unfolding in the comic and novel spheres, especially the *High Republic* stories. That's a period a few hundred years before the movies, during which the Galactic republic is at its most powerful, but facing equally powerful threats to its control. Quantic Dream, the studio most recently behind Detroit: Become Human and Beyond: Two Souls, is delving into that potential, and crafting its own story of alien species, space battles, and lightsaber-wielding Jedi.

Like Quantic Dream's previous work, Star Wars Eclipse puts players in control of multiple playable characters in a linked story, and the decisions you make along the way dramatically alter subsequent events and endings. While we don't know the exact specifics of who those leading protagonists are, we have seen some gorgeous cinematic imagery teasing what's in store. This includes the presence of Jedi being forced to ignite their lightsabers, a looming military threat, and even a glimpse of a younger Yoda brooding in the Jedi council chamber.

Quantic Dream's games have proven divisive, exhibiting some remarkable technical and artistic expertise, but sometimes struggling to establish believable fictional frameworks. I'm hoping that the team's involvement with the colorful Star Wars universe can be the difference maker, as a good story-focused game in that galaxy far, far away would be hard to resist. **BY MATT MILLER**

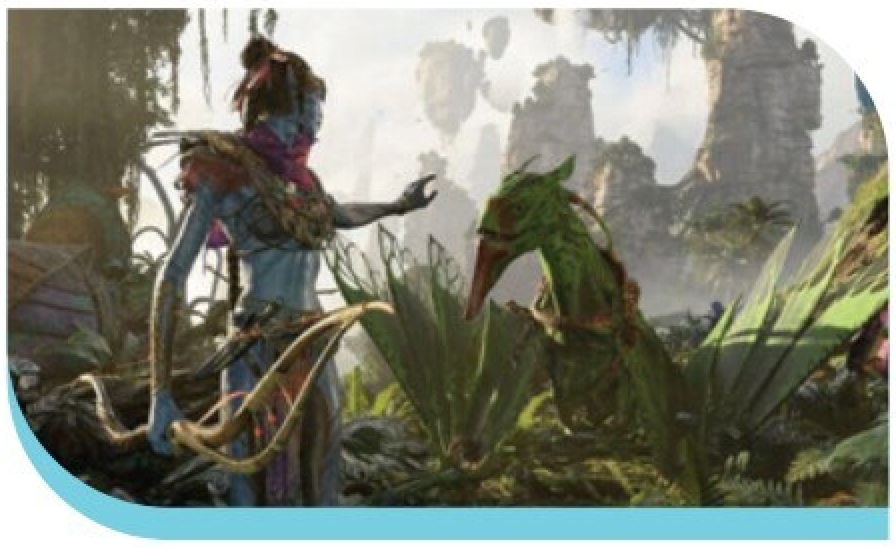
PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action-Adventure
PUBLISHER Quantic Dream, Lucasfilm Games
DEVELOPER Quantic Dream **RELEASE** TBA

AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

Pandora's box has never looked this pretty

Avatar 2 is the sequel to the highest-grossing film of all time: *Avatar,* released in 2009. With additional sequels already in development, it seems the world is diving headfirst into Pandora later this year.

Oddly enough, though, there's a good chance our first foray back into the Avatar universe won't be the movie. It'll be Massive Entertainment's Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora. Publisher Ubisoft says players will control a Na'vi protagonist journeying across the Western Frontier, encountering new creatures and characters, likely as colorful and beautiful as the world of Pandora. In doing so, though, players encounter the Resources Development Administration, an organization set on mining Pandora with little regard to the damage it might do to the planet. That invasive action places Pandora's natural beauty in harm's way. It sounds like we must fight to protect the untouched Western Frontier.



With no look at gameplay just yet, it's tough to get truly excited about playing Frontiers of Pandora. However, the mere prospect of entering *Avatar*'s world for the first time in over a decade, exploring it in first-person rather than sitting in a movie theater, has me eyeing this game as we progress through 2022. I'm not necessarily an *Avatar* fan – it's a fine movie – but the fascination around the property and the question of whether its sequels will live up to the first has me excited to see how it translates to my preferred medium of storytelling.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Stadia Luna • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action-Adventure **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment **RELEASE** 2022

PLANET OF LANA

Sci-fi serenity

As a fan of cinematic puzzle platformers like Limbo and Little Nightmares, Planet of Lana had my curiosity from the get-go. Granted, it's not a horror experience but rather a sci-fi tale about a young protagonist and her cat-like companion on a planet-hopping space odyssey.

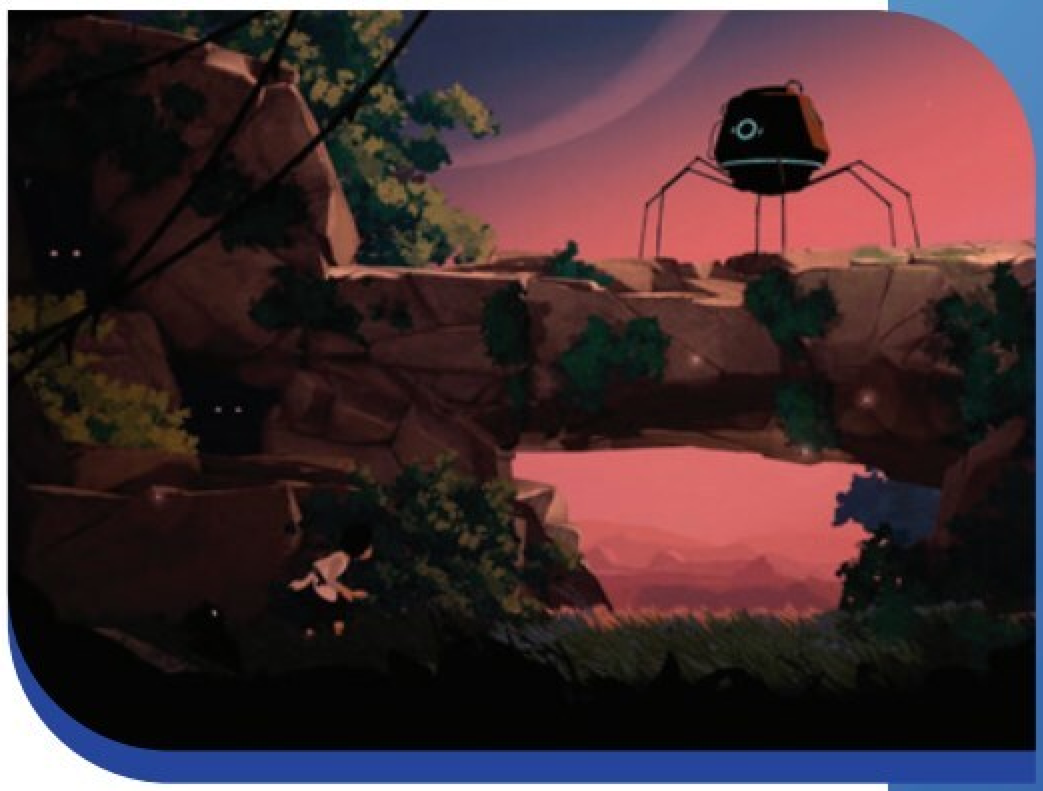
We still don't know much about how the game plays other than you'll have to solve puzzles and work in tandem with your adorable partner. Developer Wishfully also states some obstacles encourage stealth and wit rather than brute force, though there are some reflex-focused action sequences. The most recent cinematic trailer showed the character sprinting across a desert atop a robotic horse as spider-like machines follow in hot pursuit. As for the plot, Thunderful only teases that the story spans several galaxies over centuries.

I may not have a firm grasp of what's happening, but I do know that Planet of Lana is quite the looker. This is a beautiful game backed by a powerful soundtrack by Takeshi Furukawa, composer of The Last Guardian. If the fantastic music from the game's last trailer is any indication, Planet of Lana sounds as good as it looks.

Planet of Lana lacks a firm release date, but it's launching this year for Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Thunderful Publishing **DEVELOPER** Wishfully **RELEASE** 2022



GOTHAM KNIGHTS

Batman's protégés take the spotlight

I think Batman: Arkham Origins gets a bad rap. As the only Batman Arkham game designed by a studio other than Rocksteady, it got heat for being "derivative." Some criticism might be valid, but Origins remains an entertaining exploration of Batman's early years and is full of great combat and fun open-world adventuring. As such, I'm excited to see what developer WB Games Montréal does next in Gotham City.

Set in an original version of the DC Universe, Gotham Knights tells a story about what happens in the Dark Knight's city after the death of its iconic hero. Fortunately, this troubled metropolis has four young champions ready to fill Batman's oversized boots. Nightwing, Batgirl, Robin, and Red Hood all have their own moves, skill trees, abilities, gear, and costume sets, which means your approach to combat could vary greatly depending on who you bring into battle. For example, Red Hood is a skilled marksman, making him a great ranged combatant, while Robin prefers stealth and uses status effects to disrupt enemies.

I can't wait to take the Batcycle for a spin around the city, but I might invite a friend to join me in my crusade since Gotham Knights allows for two-player, online co-op. Interestingly, players don't need to be within each other's vicinity and can freely explore different parts of the city to cover more ground. I'm also eager to see how WB Montréal works fan-favorite antagonist Court of Owls into the story when Gotham Knights hits later this year.

BY BEN REEVES

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games **DEVELOPER** WB Games Montréal **RELEASE** 2022

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

Can't Harley wait

It's been seven years since developer Rocksteady put a bow on its beloved Batman: Arkham trilogy, and fans have been dying for the acclaimed studio's next venture. For a time, rumors swirled about a game starring DC Comics' Man of Steel, but it turns out Rocksteady's new adventure doesn't let you play as Superman; instead, you must figure out how to take him down.

Intergalactic supervillain Brainiac has invaded Metropolis and brainwashed the members of the Justice League; Superman, The Flash, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman all appear in the trailers. You control the four members of Task Force X (aka The Suicide Squad) under the watchful eye of Amanda Waller.

Harley has her trusty pistol and baseball bat, plus a grappling hook to get her from rooftop to rooftop. The hulking King Shark can climb up buildings and use his brute force to destroy enemies within his reach, plus a Gatling gun. Deadshot's jetpack lets him soar around and use his arsenal. Finally, Captain Boomerang has speed, teleportation, and – you guessed it – a boomerang. You can swap between the four members when playing solo, or you can invite others to join in four-player co-op sessions.

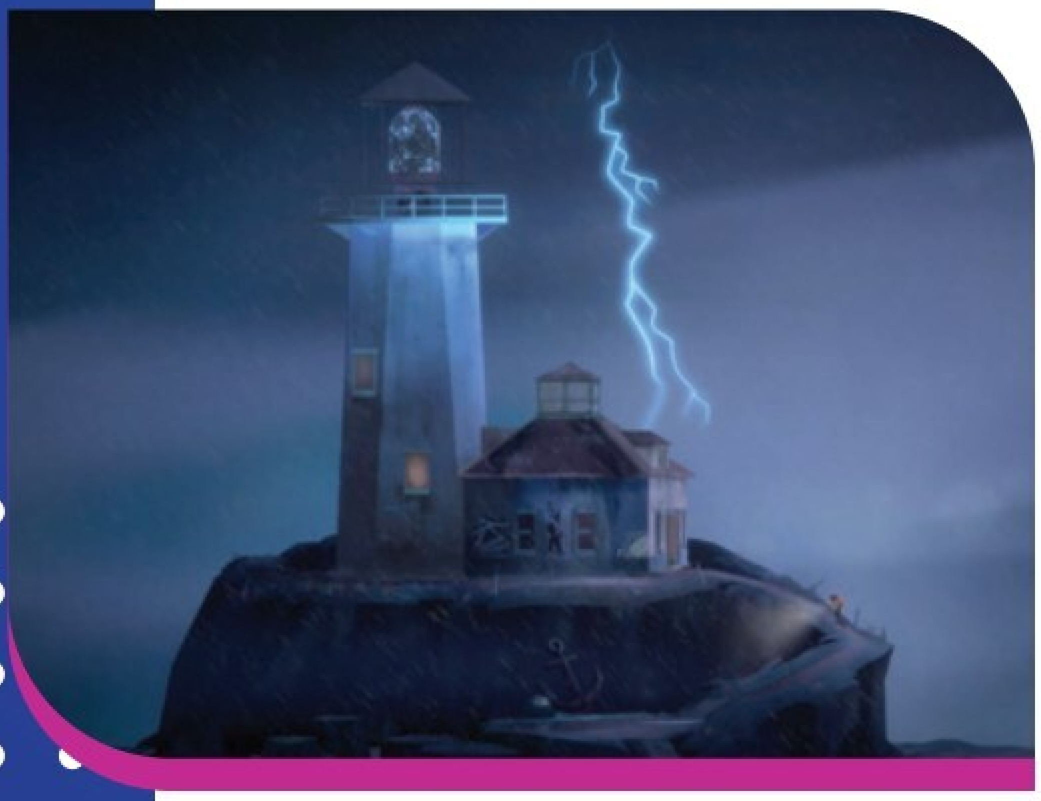
Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League looks like a supremely fun romp through the DC Universe. Now that James Gunn's *The Suicide Squad* redeemed Task Force X on the silver screen, we can't wait to see what kind of hell we can raise in Rocksteady's take on the team. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Games **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios **RELEASE** 2022

OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

Going home

Night School Studio has spent the last few years quietly becoming one of the industry's most prolific small-scale developers – releasing games like Afterparty, a mobile Mr. Robot game, and the Apple Arcade exclusive Next Stop Nowhere. However, six years after cuttings its teeth on its debut adventure game, Oxenfree, the developer is going back to its roots.



Oxenfree II: Lost Signals stars Riley, who recently returned to her hometown Carmena to investigate mysterious radio transmissions. As expected from an Oxenfree sequel, Lost Signals looks full of atmospheric horror. It also looks much bigger than its predecessor – more closely resembling the comparatively gargantuan world of Afterparty.

But it's Riley's age that has me most interested in Lost Signals. Oxenfree and Afterparty centered on young adults, but the protagonist here is firmly in her thirties. This not only puts her closer to my own age, but the age of the game's creators. Already no stranger to strong storytelling, I'm curious to see how Night School handles an older character – in terms of how she navigates the trials of adulthood and the messy relationships that come with. Look for Lost Signals sometime this year on PS5, PS4, Switch, and PC.

BY BLAKE HESTER

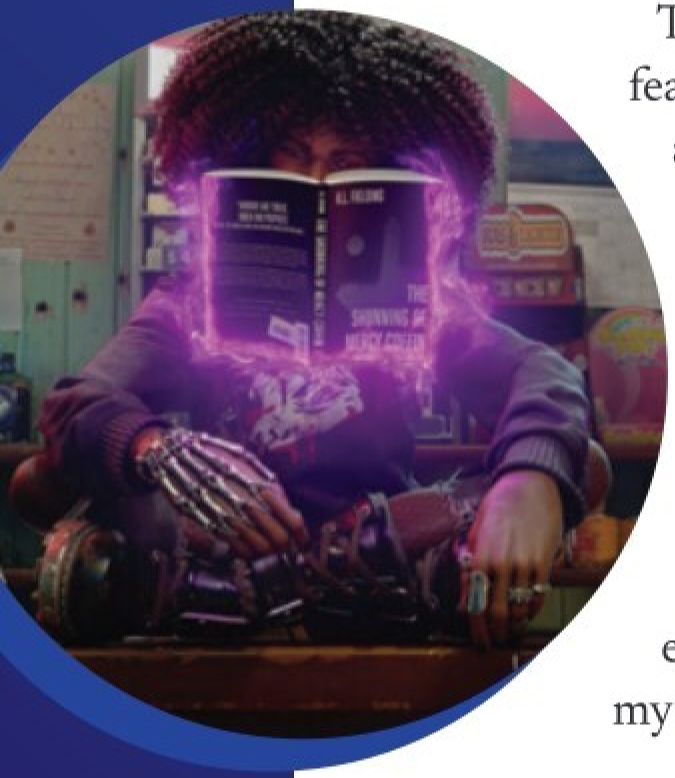
PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** MWM Interactive **DEVELOPER** Night School Studio
RELEASE 2022

REDFALL

Making vampire slayers cool again

Arkane has mostly made a name for itself in the single-player space, with fantastic games like the Dishonored series and Prey. But with last year's Deathloop, the developer finally began experimenting with multiplayer. Now Redfall is a chance to expand on that ambition.

This open-world adventure features both single-player and cooperative multiplayer modes. If there's one thing I can always count on with Arkane, it's fantastic level design coupled with creative powers, and I'm ready to see both in an experience I can share with my friends.



The game's namesake, Redfall, is an isolated town in Massachusetts, where a failed scientific experiment resulted in a vampire onslaught. Like zombies, vampires may seem like old news these days, but I'm optimistic that Arkane can bring its own rich lore and unique twist to the bloodsucking foes. After all, it's been teased these aren't your average vampires, as they continually evolve with new powers. They also have human worshippers helping them succeed.

As these overpowered baddies hunt to kill everything with a heartbeat, you must team up with other survivors to become the perfect vampire-slaying team. Your character options include cryptozoologist and inventor Devinder Crousley, telekinetic student Layla Ellison, combat engineer Remi de la Rosa, and supernatural sharpshooter Jacob Boyer. Trying different teammate loadouts and combining the strengths of different characters looks to be part of the fun and strategy.

While much of Redfall is still under wraps, Arkane's track record speaks for itself, and I'm most looking forward to seeing the powers at each character's disposal.

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks **DEVELOPER** Arkane Studios
RELEASE Summer 2022

FORSPOKEN

Forspoken's dazzling action RPG combat and fantastical world design look as good as you'd expect from Square Enix. However, the game's fish out of water story is what really fascinates me. The game stars Frey, a modern-day New Yorker who gets dropped into a Final Fantasy-style world and acquires magic powers to boot. Forspoken arrives May 24 for PlayStation 5 and PC. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

ADVANCE WARS 1+2: RE-BOOT CAMP

Intelligent Systems is well known for its Fire Emblem series, but its other big tactical franchise, Advance Wars, has been largely ignored for years. This remake of two GBA classics puts players in command of a growing army as they complete a series of turn-based, tactical encounters. If you missed the originals, as I did, you can finally see what all the fuss is about when Re-Boot Camp hits the Switch this Spring. **BY BEN REEVES**

WEIRD WEST

Weird West is an isometric twin-stick shooter coming to PlayStation, Xbox, and PC platforms in March. Developed by Wofleye Studios, a team led by former Dishonored developers, Weird West wears its immersive-sim inspiration on its sleeve, and its western shootouts are all the better for it. With its unique art style, spooky score, and fun storytelling, Weird West may end up as a must-play in 2022. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

GOD OF WAR RAGNAROK

Let's start this ending

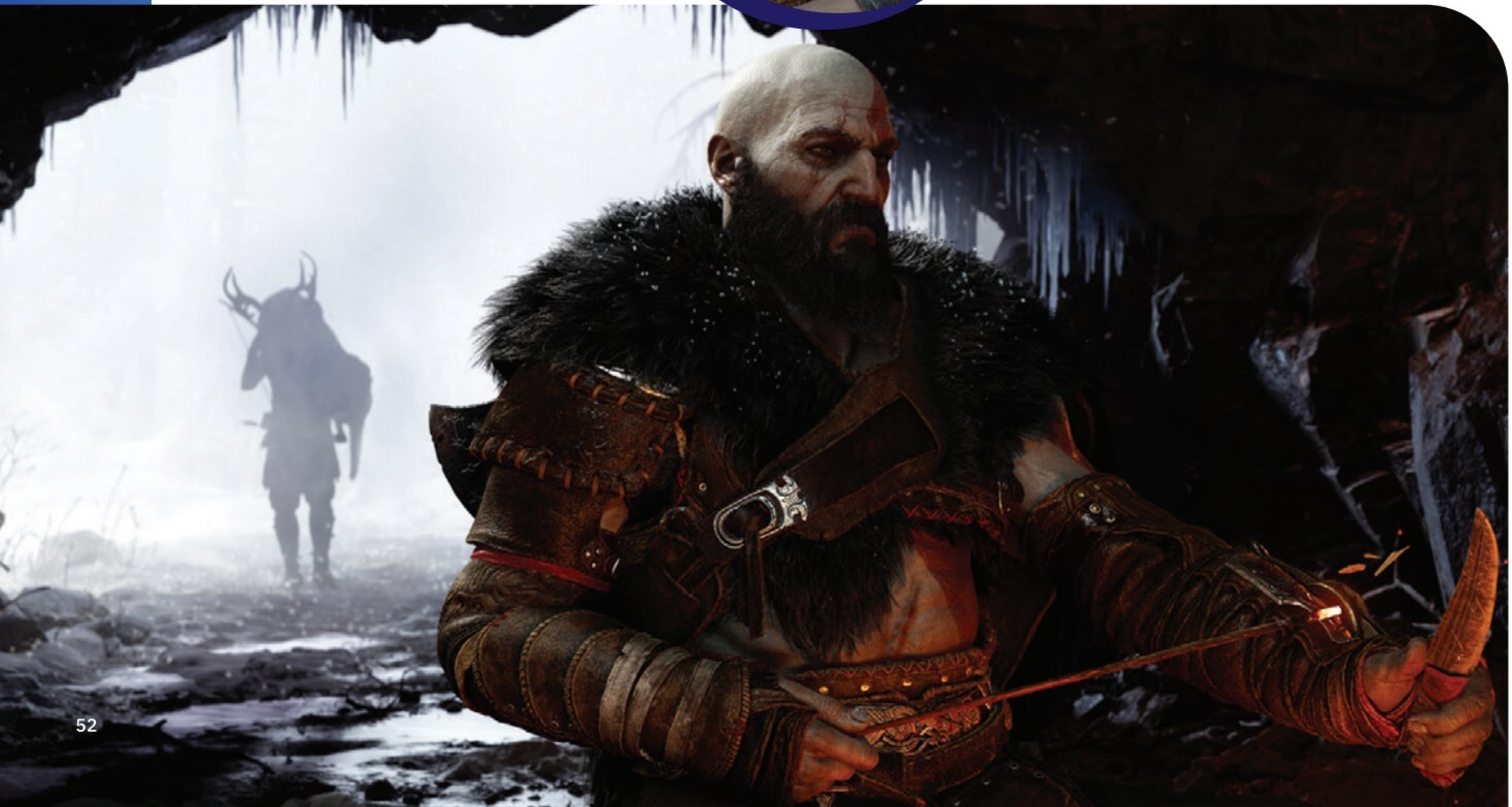
Diving deeper into Norse mythology, God of War Ragnarok will take players through all the nine realms, where they meet even more of the Aesir gods. Most fans expected a sequel to 2018's God of War reboot, but the first official confirmation didn't come until 2020. Even then, the announcement simply flashed a logo and release window. The game was later delayed. Despite all that, news of the upcoming follow-up fired up my imagination.

It wasn't until September 2021 that we got a first look at God of War Ragnarok. In the trailer, the series' long-time protagonist Kratos sits in a cave while his son, the budding half-god Atreus, enters with a deer slung over his shoulders, hinting that the growing kid is more self-reliant. But he's not ready to strike out on his own yet, as the video shows the duo traveling to gorgeous locations, encountering old acquaintances, and seeking Kratos' Norse counterpart, Tyr. We even get a glimpse at a friendly ally, the giant Angrboda.

Ragnarok is coming. According to the intense action we've seen thus far, Kratos and Atreus will battle new enemies – including centaur-like creatures and possibly the god of thunder, Thor – while the threat of old foes and past deeds still haunt their steps. There's a lot to look forward to and I can't wait to help Kratos and son fight through the end of days when God of War Ragnarok hits later this year.

BY JILL GRODT

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Sony Santa Monica Studio
RELEASE 2022



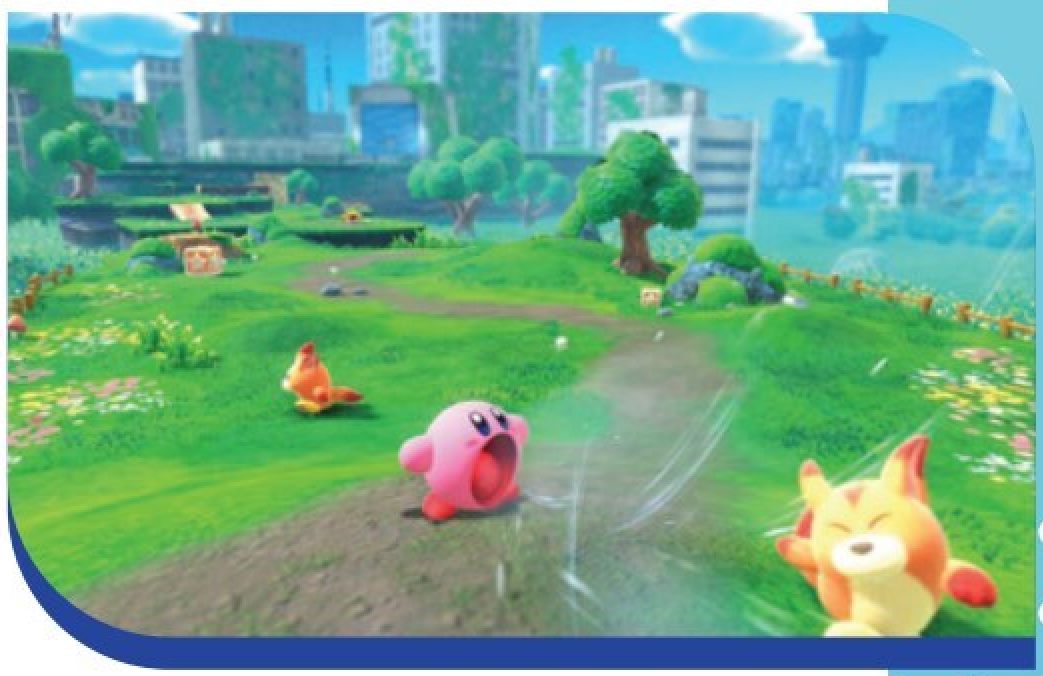
KIRBY AND THE FORGOTTEN LAND

A new era for the pink puff

Kirby and the Forgotten Land has the hallmarks we've come to expect from the series: copying abilities, platforming challenges, and the adorable pink puff. However, this new adventure, the series' first fully 3D action game, marks an opportunity for change. Forgotten Land is set in a strange new world that feels dramatically different from the norm and that prospect is exciting.

Kirby and the Forgotten Land hasn't abandoned colorful backdrops, but it has taken on a darker, more desolate feel. Kirby explores the mysterious world of a past civilization, full of abandoned structures like shopping malls and amusement parks. While there's a post-apocalyptic feel, something hopeful remains, as you can see nature restoring and bringing its own beauty to each locale.

After washing up on the beach, Kirby must find a way through this enigmatic place and rescue Waddle Dees along the way. Plenty of the pink puff's signature copying abilities have already been confirmed, such as ice, sword, and spike, but Kirby also has some new skills. A drill ability lets him dig underground to sneak up on enemies, while he can blast them from afar thanks to the ranger ability. The reveal trailer also showcased some big boss battles, like one against a large gorilla who throws rocks and swipes his massive arms at the miniature hero.



The series has always had a knack for creativity, and this could be Kirby's greatest chance to shine yet.

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

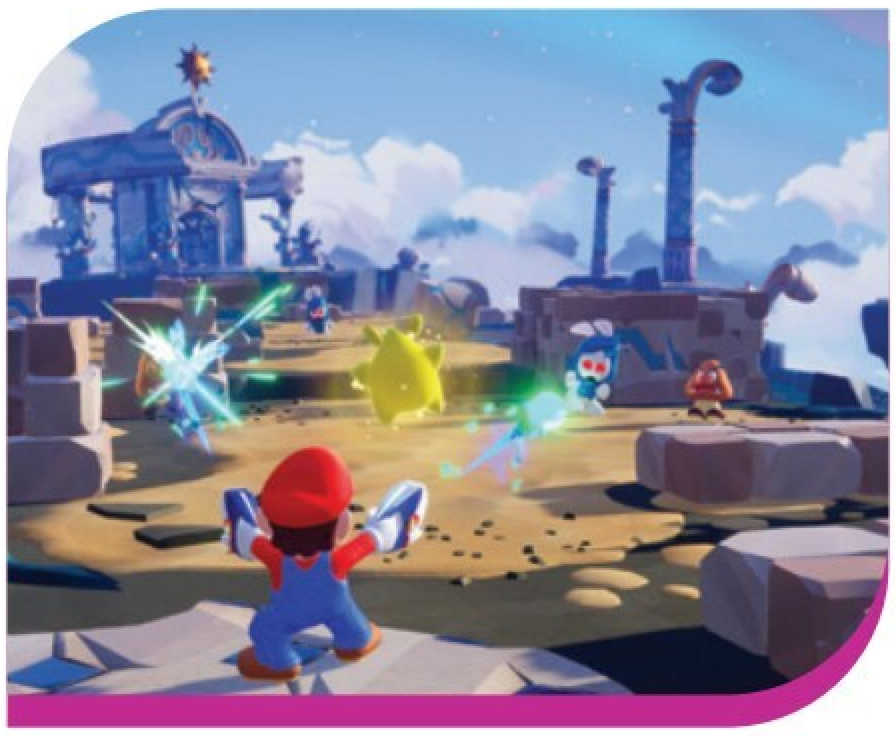
PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** HAL Laboratory
RELEASE March 25

MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE

Mario's spaced-out strategy

Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle was released nearly five years ago, but it still seems like a fever dream. I loved the take on tactical combat so much that I didn't even mind Ubisoft's absurd Rabbids came along for the ride. Sparks of Hope looks to change up the XCOM-inspired formula a bit, but it doesn't look any less fun.

In addition to returning heroes Mario, Rabbid Peach, and Rabbid Luigi, players can control new characters like a Rabbid version of Rosalina and a Rabbid/Lumas hybrid. This adventure has Mario and crew traveling through space to different planets as they rescue creatures named Sparks. These are Rabbid-like star creatures that ... look, the story doesn't really matter as long as the game offers plenty of rich tactical options. Fortunately, it doesn't look like Ubisoft will disappoint in that arena. Unlike the first game, turn-based battles no longer take place on a confined grid. Instead, characters can freely run around the battlefield as they unleash a barrage of rockets and string multiple attacks between foes.



Levels are also less linear than they were in Kingdom Battle, and when players touch down on a new planet, they can freely explore in any direction, talk to NPCs, solve optional puzzles, and participate in battles. Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope is set to release on Switch later this year, and I'm eager to hear more about this strategy-filled space romp.

BY BEN REEVES

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Milan
RELEASE 2022

WONDER WOMAN

A match made in Themyscira

To be filed under "especially ideal matches between character and development studio," Monolith Productions, creator of Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor and its sequel, is turning its attention to the Amazon princess: Wonder Woman.

A new evolution of the Nemesis system is promised – a particularly cool innovation that allows for unique and ever-changing enemies that adapt to your interactions. In the same vein as Monolith's most recent work, Wonder Woman is a third-person action combat game. We can likely expect DC's superhero to exhibit the same flashy combo-laden sword work we witnessed in the Lord of the Rings titles. However, I'd be awfully surprised if we didn't also see the spinning whip of a golden lasso this time around.

The early trailer promises a single-player open-world experience and heavily implies the game will take place on the Amazon home of Themyscira. This prospect has me incredibly intrigued; the mythical landscape has tremendous potential for beauty and discovery. Whether in the comics or the more recent films, the mysterious island is filled with ancient structures, idyllic nature spaces, and varied landscapes.

Expect a long wait on this one, as details have remained scarce in the weeks after last December's announcement. But there's enormous potential here, with a fantastic character who is long overdue for a big game, being built by a talented team that has already constructed the mechanical foundation to create something magical. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games **DEVELOPER** Monolith Productions **RELEASE** TBA

ATOMIC HEART

Eat your heart out

Not many games have narratives and creature designs as bizarre and disturbing as Mundfish's highly anticipated, open-world action RPG Atomic Heart. Footage of a man-bear (for lack of a better term) with a bloody apple situated atop its head still haunts my dreams. And don't even get me started on the other vile creatures and mechanized automaton that roam the dystopic Russian landscape.

In Atomic Heart's unconventional retelling of history, the USSR has made incredible technological advancements that push its military might and scientific prowess decades ahead of the other world powers. You play as a special KGB agent named P-3. With an array of makeshift melee weapons, zany firearms, and gravity-breaking, reality-bending abilities, you'll tear down everything standing in your way, if you've mustered enough courage, of course.

One of our editors aptly nicknamed Atomic Heart "Soviet Bioshock," and the wonderful mix of frenetic FPS mechanics and atmospheric horror supports the moniker. From lush forests with mutant-infested towns to underground laboratories coated in puddles of guts and blood, Atomic Heart isn't for the faint of heart. P-3 joins a cast of oddballs, including an older woman with an oversized ladle (I hope she uses that thing to slay monsters!). So, you won't feel too lonely during the adventure, but the primary objective and overarching story have yet to be announced. **BY JASON GUISAO**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Mundfish **DEVELOPER** Mundfish **RELEASE** TBA

HOGWARTS LEGACY

Run back to school

Despite the studio being silent on the project for quite a while, I'm eager to see how Avalanche's take on the Wizarding World in Hogwarts Legacy is progressing. Separating itself from the current timeline of the *Fantastic Beasts* films or the classic *Harry Potter* books, this new adventure puts players in the robes of a Hogwarts student sometime in the 1800s, long before the modern conveniences of Muggles have caught up to magic.

Hogwarts Legacy allows players to choose and join their favorite house, where they'll take classes to concoct potions or cast charms. You'll learn spells and expand on your abilities along the way. Hopefully, there are more than a few Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons because the grand adventure your student is bound to embark on will uncover what Avalanche calls "a hidden truth to the Wizarding World," and that most definitely has to be dangerous.

The school itself and its place in the series timeline have me most sold on Legacy. Having a modern way to explore Hogwarts and role-playing the wizard or witch-in-training life is a dream for a Harry Potter fan. Being able to meet characters from a bygone time or uncover new stories untethered from the well-worn territory of the books is exciting enough for me to want to enroll for whatever Avalanche is cooking up. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/ Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Portkey Games **DEVELOPER** Avalanche **RELEASE** 2022

SAINTS ROW

The takeover

Saints Row emerged as a promising, comedic alternative to Rockstar's classic Grand Theft Auto franchise. But no number of intergalactic escapades or suggestive toys-turned-weapons could help the series garner the same worldwide success as its open-world, crime-themed rival. By the time the 2022 reboot launches, it'll have been seven years since the last installment of Saints Row.

Stilwater, Steelport, and Hell itself, as well as the original Boss, Johnny Gat and Co., are long gone. Instead, a new crew of Saints is slowly emerging in the desert-side metropolis of Santo Ileso, the largest open world developer Volition has ever created. Of course, rival gangs have already established tight holds. Los Panteros are brawny, muscle car fanatics with deadly strength. The Idols are a cult, clothed in neon garb and LED helmets, that attack in large numbers. And finally, Marshall members are violent and well-trained with high-tech capabilities and far-reaching influence.

A new Boss has appeared from the growing conflicts in Santo Ileso with an accompanying crew of three colorful personalities – Neenah, Kevin, and Eli. The four deviant heroes partake in drug deals, heists, gunfights, and other criminal ventures to make a name for their purple-colored, titular faction. The Saints Row reboot, like the first two games in the series, is all about building an empire. With visuals bolstered by new-gen consoles and yet another campaign that's playable in co-op – something GTA fans have been yearning for – Saints Row might reach even greater heights than its predecessors. **BY JASON GUISAO**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Deep Silver Volition **RELEASE** August 23

SEA OF STARS

Sabotage Studio's Sea of Stars is oozing with charm. As you take the role of two Children of the Solstice, sun powers and moon powers combine for potent Eclipse magic on your quest to defeat The Fleshmancer. Sea of Stars is scheduled to land on Switch, PC, "and more" sometime in 2022. **BY DANIEL TACK**

EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: HUNDRED HEROES

Remember Suikoden? It's okay if you don't, because we're essentially getting a modern-day entry with this title. It's a classic turn-based JRPG with over 100 playable characters to collect and master, so you'll be scrambling to assemble the best team. Funded by Kickstarter, this new take on a classic subgenre is coming to PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC in 2023. **BY DANIEL TACK**

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHERNOBYL

It's the quiet moments in STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl that have me most interested. Where many trailers emphasize bombast, in our most recent look, developer/publisher GSC Game World put a lot of its focus on the humanity found in the nuclear wasteland. Couple that with some of the best visuals we've seen on new-gen machines, and you have a game I'm bound to check out when it's released in December for Xbox Series X/S and PC. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

It's been a long wait for the sequel to Team Cherry's beloved Metroidvania. Hollow Knight: Silksong was originally planned as DLC, but the developer decided to expand the scope into a full title. Unfortunately, since the game's announcement in 2019, the studio has been mostly quiet, leaving us desperate for any additional information for this Switch and PC title. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

LITTLE DEVIL INSIDE

The devil's advocate

Little Devil Inside has been in the works for several years, but I didn't lay eyes on it until June 2020's PlayStation 5 showcase. In a way, that's a blessing; waiting over a year and a half for this charming-looking adventure game has been agonizing. I can't imagine knowing about it back in 2015 and still waiting for it to drop.

The adventure stars Billy, a hunter who takes on research missions at the behest of a university scientist. It's hard not to smile at the almost toy-like presentation or the pleasant British narrator. The whole game has a Wes Anderson vibe that, as a fan of his films, I'm on board for. The game tasks you with slaying all manner of fantastical beasts in what looks to be deliberate combat. The variety in gameplay seems promising too. Thus far, we've seen Billy go deep-sea fishing, don a diving suit to explore underwater, and prepare meals over a campfire. More than anything, I want to explore Little Devil Inside's world, whether that be on foot, atop a mule, or aboard a train.

Little Devil Inside occupies the list of games for which I never need to see another trailer. I'm already sold on the experience, and no amount of new footage will change that. All I want is a release date, and since it's scheduled to arrive this year, hopefully, that means it's coming sooner rather than later. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Neostream Interactive **DEVELOPER** Neostream Interactive **RELEASE** 2022

STRAY

The powerful pull of a cat

Any cat owner will tell you felines are fascinating creatures, despite spending most of their days lounging around and begging for food. You never know what new hiding spot, ridiculous hunting pursuit, or animated reaction a cat will find. So it's not all that surprising that developer BlueTwelve Studio found inspiration in its own furballs for a third-person adventure game called Stray. In it, you assume the role of a stray cat, where according to the game's official website, you're encouraged to "be stealthy, nimble, silly, and sometimes as annoying as possible."

Living the life of a cat looks delightful, but what's even more exciting is the world you inhabit: a cybercity populated by robots. BlueTwelve was inspired by Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City for its aesthetics, so expect to explore neon-lit alleyways and the murky environments of the cybercity's seedy underbelly. Your mission is to get home to your family after falling into this mysterious landscape, but you'll need to traverse platforms and move obstacles to find your way through. As a bonus, you have some company along the way in a drone named B12, which can translate the robot language and store items. Cats and technology don't always get along, so I'm curious how this relationship will fare in the long run.

With an eccentric world and level design approached from a cat's abilities, I can't wait to see what Stray has in store. Cats are full of surprises and mischief, and I hope that's captured here in video game form, with plenty of humor and cuteness along the way. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive **DEVELOPER** BlueTwelve Studio **RELEASE** Early 2022

FINAL FANTASY XVI

A return to the fantasy

One of the great joys of being a Final Fantasy fan is watching the series morph its core concepts into intriguing new shapes. After the car road trip from the 15th installment, Final Fantasy XVI is turning to a decidedly dark fantasy wrapping.

The setting this time around is Valisthea, a landscape dotted with Mothercrystals – vast crystalline mountains that gift magic and power to those nearby. Competing nations arose around each Mothercrystal, but all now face the looming threat of a blight that may overwhelm them. Also in the mix are titanic summonable Eikons, like Ifrit and Titan, which reside within specific individuals called Dominants. That immense power leads to godlike worship of those people in some countries or indentured servitude in others.

On a more intimate scale, Final Fantasy XVI follows Clive Rosfield, the firstborn son of the archduke of a major nation. His younger brother, Joshua, inherits the role of Dominant of the Phoenix. A mysterious tragedy sets Clive on a path for revenge that appears to be the crux of the narrative.

I've enjoyed lots of the more futuristic or modern-day takes on the Final Fantasy mythology, but I'll always look forward to new installments that return to the classic fantasy milieu that birthed the franchise. Final Fantasy XVI appears to be just that, and the potential for beautiful real-time combat on PS5 has me eager to learn more. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix Creative Business Unit III **RELEASE** TBA

STARFIELD

As hype builds, details are still scarce

Bethesda Game Studios is the development team behind two of gaming's greatest role-playing franchises: The Elder Scrolls and Fallout. For the first time in over 25 years, Bethesda is leaving its beloved dragons and nukes behind to work on a new intellectual property. To say Starfield is highly anticipated is an understatement, but the brief looks at the game haven't done much to build up hype.

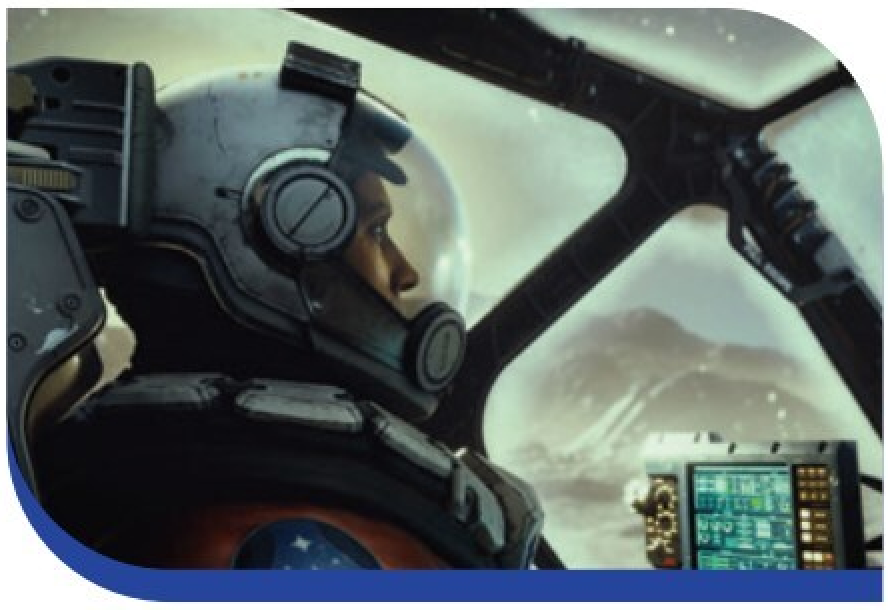
Bethesda has established Starfield's tone through a couple of short trailers – mostly showing us its vision of space travel is grounded in reality. The clips look like they could be stripped from NASA montages. There really is nothing alien to Bethesda's science-fiction vision at this point, and that's intentional, as Starfield is about answering the big question of if we are alone in the universe.

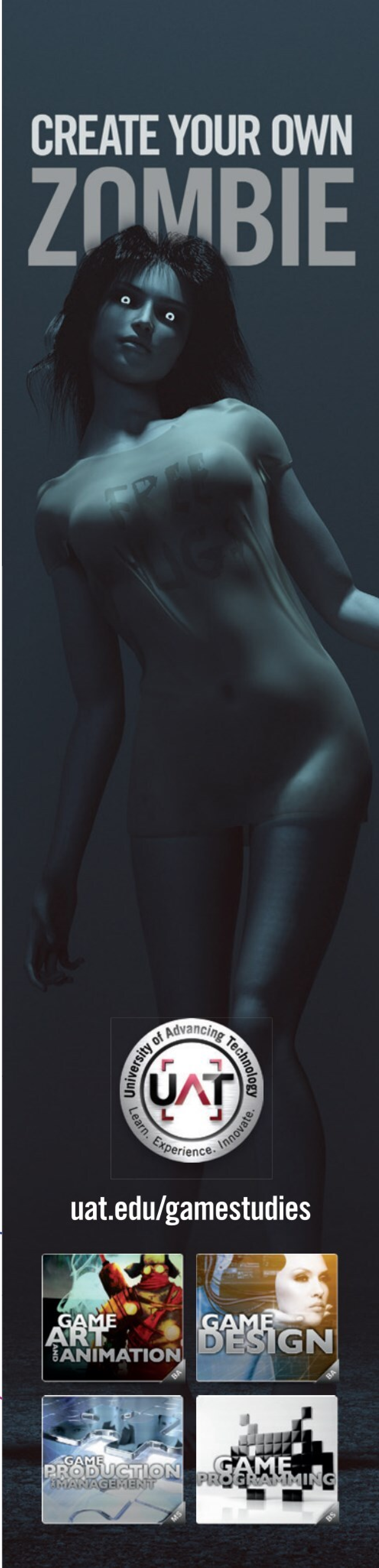
We all know what that answer is, and Starfield will eventually have us exploring a universe filled with alien life of all shapes and sizes. The player joins Constellation, the last group of space explorers, and is tasked to pave their path forward. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, game director Todd Howard said Starfield is like "Skyrim in space."

Managing director Ashley Cheng, followed up Howard's remark and called it a "Han Solo simulator," meaning the player would get their own starship to explore the universe.

Starfield has been in active development since Bethesda finished Fallout 4. We've only seen teases of what the team has been working on for over six years, but we won't have to wait long to see the complete picture, as Starfield is slated to launch on November 11. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing Game **PUBLISHER** Microsoft/Bethesda Softworks **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios **RELEASE** November 11

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A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

Sick story

I was an early advocate for A Plague Tale: Innocence. It wasn't a perfect game – the combat and stealth were somewhat unoriginal – but Asobo Studio told an incredibly compelling story about a group of kids left to their own devices in a world overrun by disease and deceit. Thankfully, A Plague Tale: Requiem looks to continue that heartfelt narrative while shoring up some of its predecessor's weaknesses.

The last time we saw Amicia and Hugo de Rune, this brother and sister duo had escaped the devastation of their homeland and survived the evil machinations of the Inquisition. Requiem picks up their story as they travel south across the sea to start a new life in an exotic new land. However, when the plague of rats follows them, the kids are forced to battle for their lives again as they chase after a prophecy that promises to cure Hugo's unique affliction.

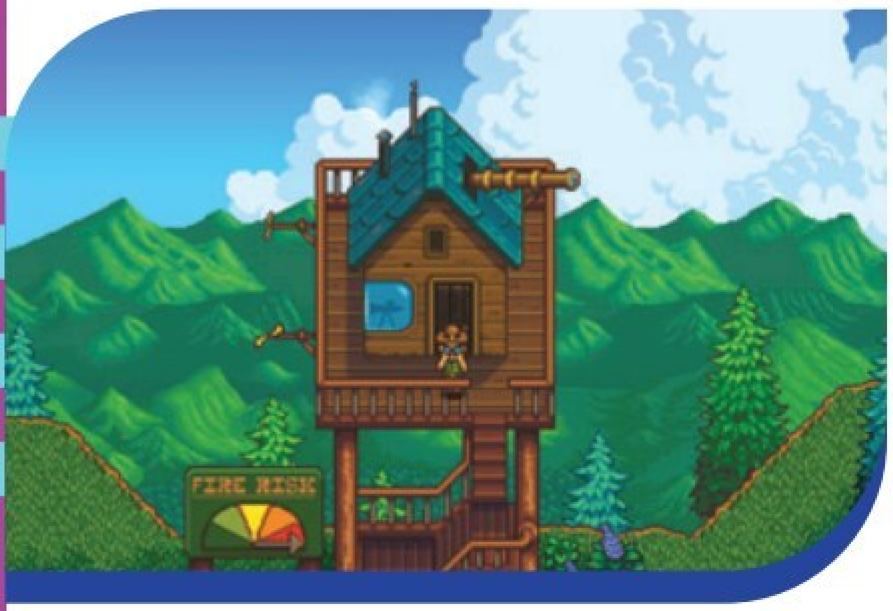
Requiem retains its stealth/action focus, but Amicia is slowly becoming a skilled survivalist, and she has access to an assortment of new weapons and tools, such as a crossbow. Asobo says Requiem's narrative explores the "cost of saving those you love," and if this story is even half as compelling as the original, it will still be worth a look. **BY BEN REEVES**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Focus Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Asobo Studio **RELEASE** 2022

HAUNTED CHOCOLATIER

An eerie craving

My first tangible news of Haunted Chocolatier came straight from the source as I sat down with developer Eric Barone, aka ConcernedApe, to talk about Stardew Valley. He touched briefly on his upcoming projects (yes, plural) and was happy to report the game likely to come out first – Haunted Chocolatier – is a solo endeavor. Despite the lack of specifics, I was thrilled to hear the indie creator's next project was in the works.



Then he surprised everyone. Barone publicly shared early Haunted Chocolatier gameplay footage, and it looked incredible. The art style immediately evokes Barone's first title, though the developer made it clear fans shouldn't expect the same experience.

"In Stardew Valley, the focus was more humble: living off the land, growing food, and connecting to the people and nature around you," Barone wrote in his news blog. "However, with my next game, I wanted to explore more fantastical possibilities ... experiences that take you beyond the ordinary. That's where magical haunted ghost chocolate comes in."

The fun of simulated chocolate making mixed with the mystery of a ghostly castle and topped with endearing-looking characters? Count me in. Haunted Chocolatier is still in early development, with PC being the only confirmed platform. However, the developer says he intends to bring the game to every major console, and I hope he does so soon. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** ConcernedApe **DEVELOPER** ConcernedApe **RELEASE** TBA

THE SEQUEL TO THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

Castles in the sky

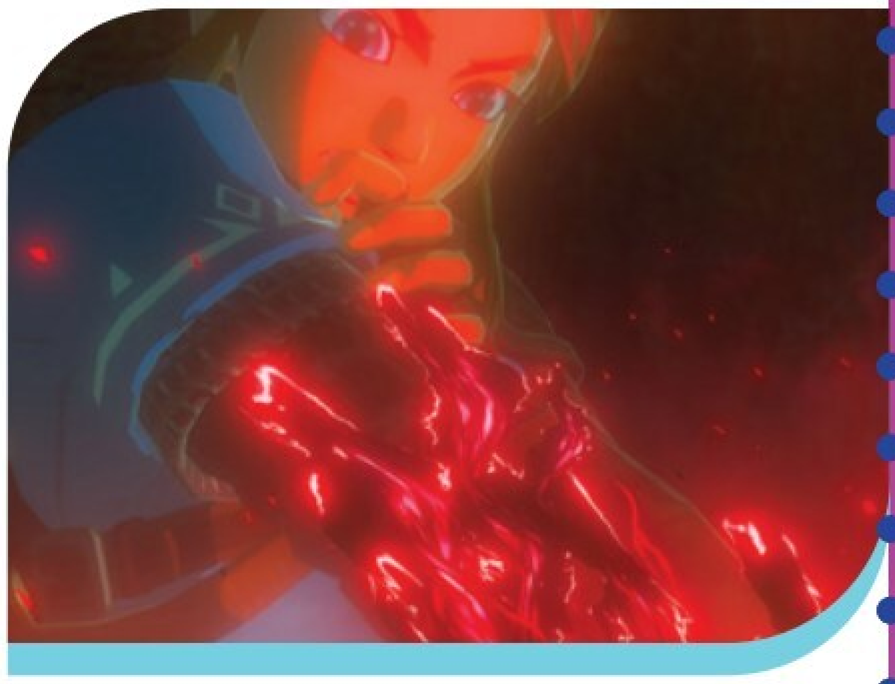
The sequel to The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild could hardly be more sought after by series fans. As the follow-up to the Switch's potential magnum opus, there's a lot of pressure for this unnamed sequel to perform. Taking place sometime after the events of the original, Hyrule Castle, surrounded yet again by a dark aura, has taken an ominous residency floating above the crater where it once was landlocked.

Link will be also be taking to the skies to explore other floating landmasses now mysteriously hovering over the Hyrule landscape. However, our hero has changed a bit since we last met. His right arm is now infected with an ancient technology, which allows him to rewind the motion of objects, sending them back in the path they came. He also has the curious ability to climb or swim through solid objects, adding yet another layer of traversal to Link's already expansive kit from the original.

Breath of the Wild was a beautiful mix of a compelling elemental sandbox to play around in and a vast, mysterious world to roam and explore. I've spent hours venturing in any given direction only to be rewarded with a helpful item or a jaw-dropping vista. It was an unforgettable, unique adventure, and this upcoming rendition of Hyrule is the world I'm most anticipating exploring again when the sequel is released later this year.

BY JOHN CARSON

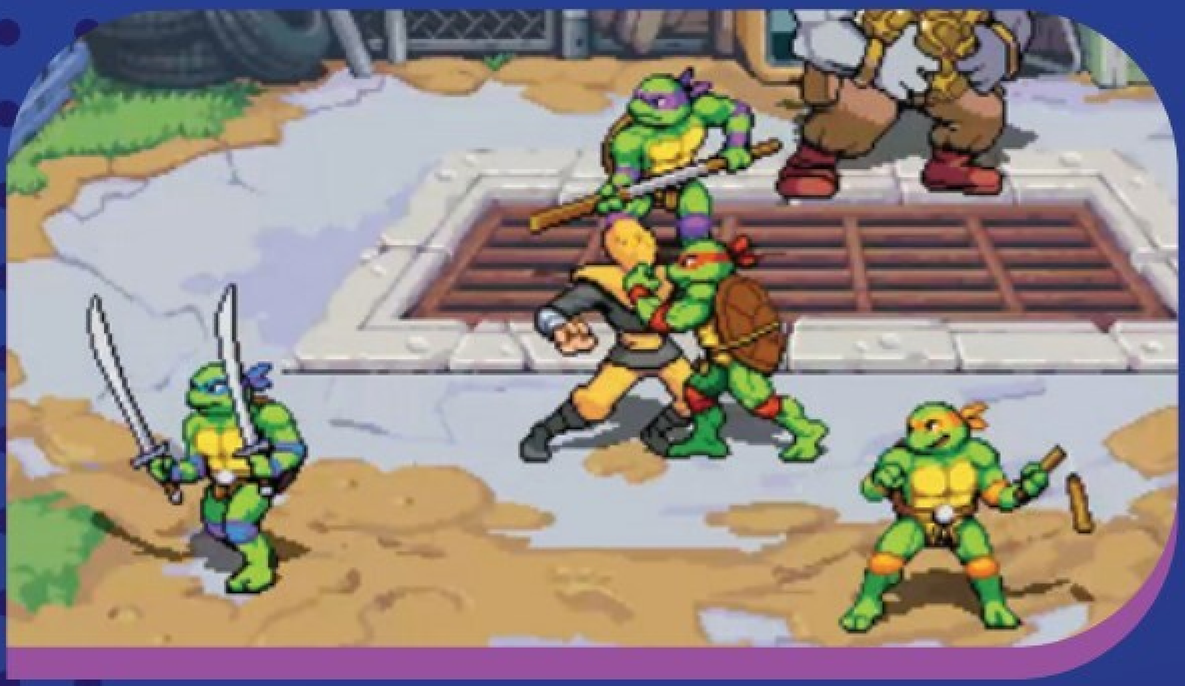
PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo
RELEASE 2022



THE OUTER WORLDS 2

One of the undeniable highlights of 2019 was Obsidian Entertainment's The Outer Worlds, which took some of the best parts of Mass Effect and Fallout and mashed them together into a pulpy sci-fi adventure full of interesting companions and humorous quests. We don't know much about the sequel (which might be a ways off) but even if it's just more of the same, you can sign me up. **BY BEN REEVES**

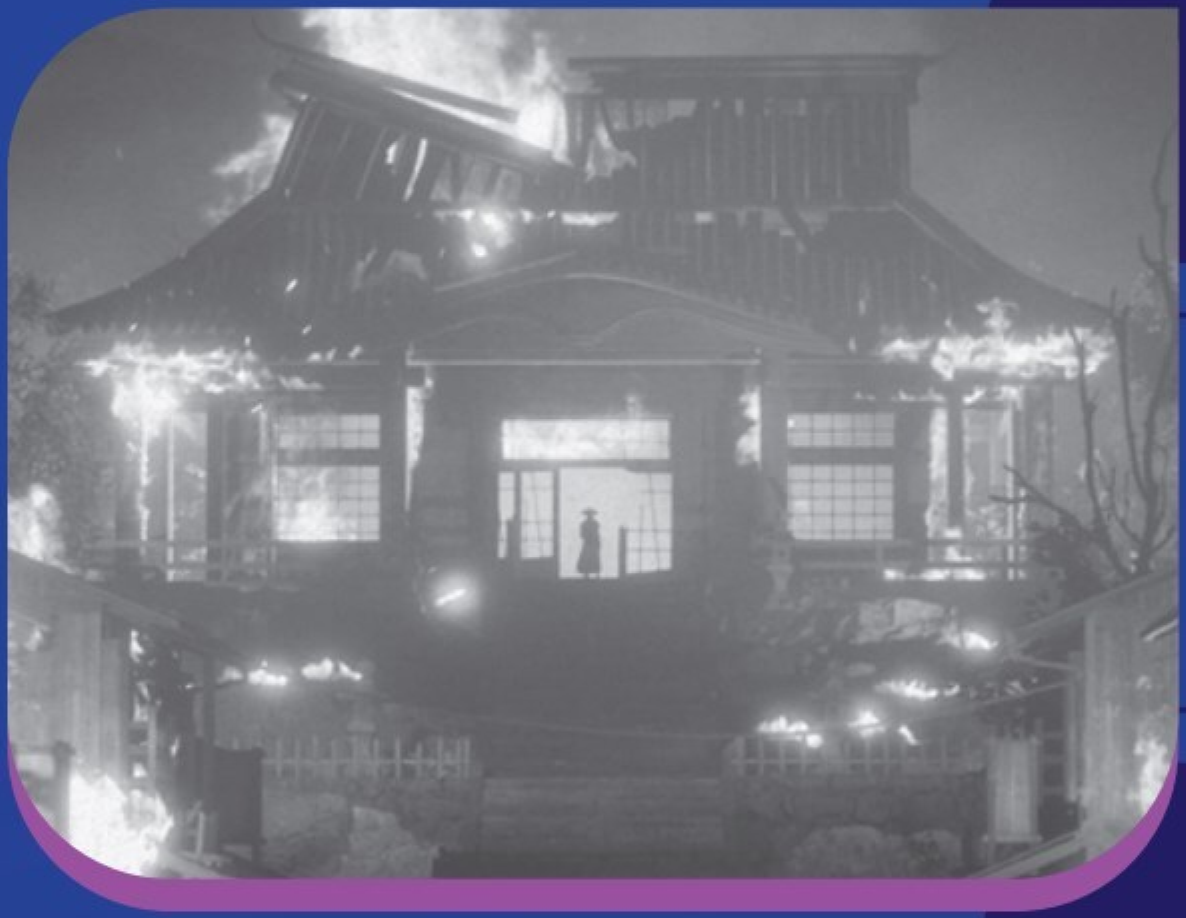
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE



I can't imagine a studio more suited to reviving the classic '80s arcade version of TMNT than Tribute Games. Games like Mercenary Kings and Panzer Paladin prove the studio's eye for retro aesthetics, and early glimpses of its efforts with the ninja teens are promising. Four-player co-op, pixel-art graphics, and individualized movesets for everyone (including a playable April O'Neil) are just some of the reasons to be stoked for a 2022 release on Switch and PC. **BY MATT MILLER**

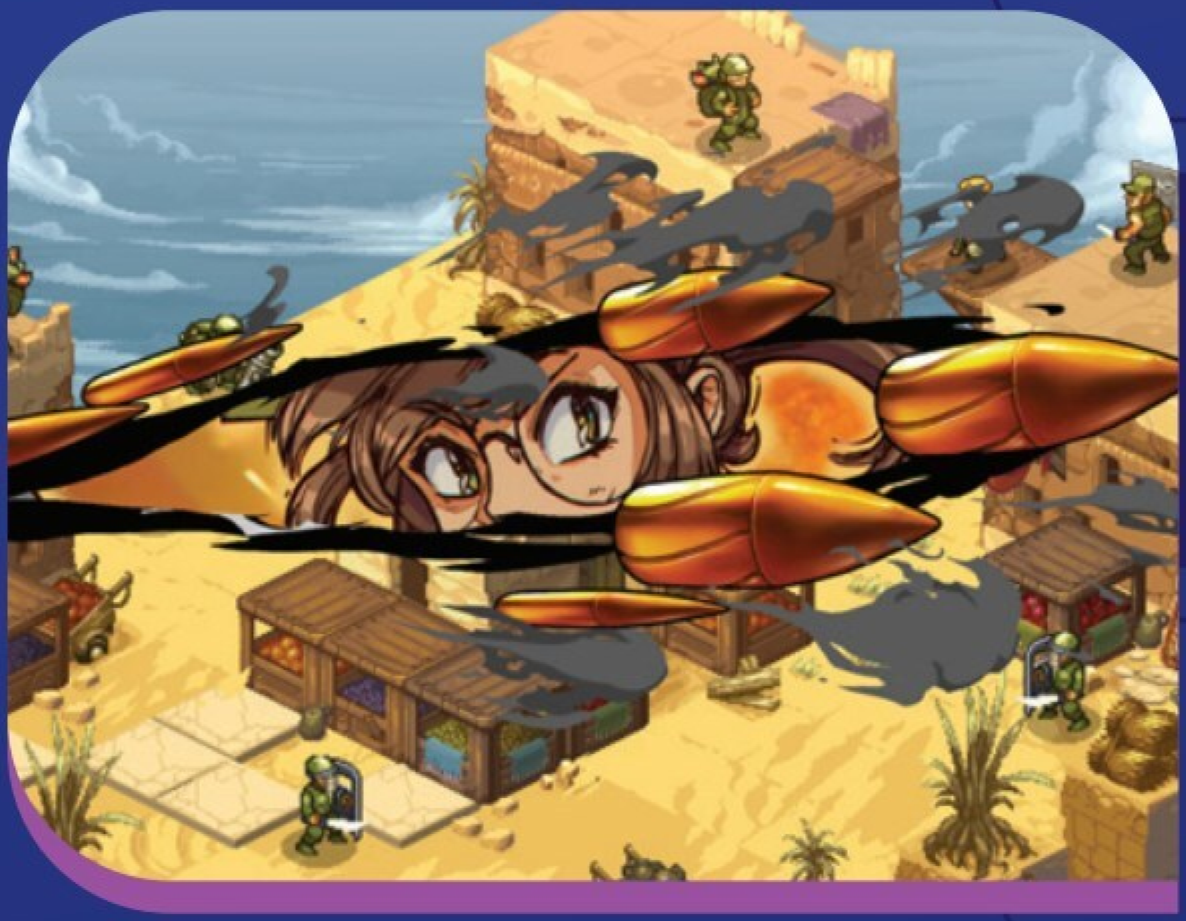
TREK TO YOMI

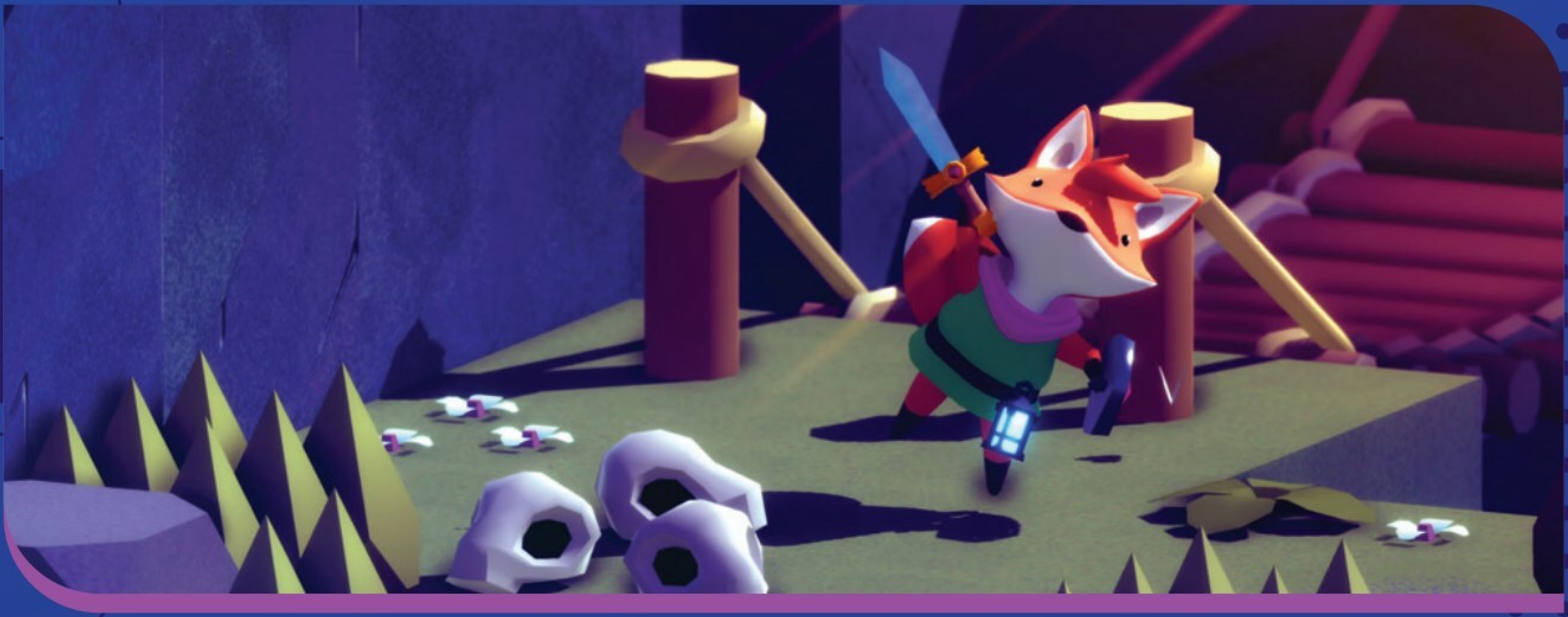
Cinematic and intriguing, Trek to Yomi follows a samurai who failed to keep a promise he made to his now-dead master. Its striking black-and-white visuals, poignant plot concept, and refined-looking combat system have earned Trek to Yomi a spot on our list. Devolver Digital's tale releases on PlayStation and Xbox consoles, as well as PC, in 2022. **BY JILL GRODT**



METAL SLUG TACTICS

2022 is bringing the tactical twist on Metal Slug I never knew I wanted, and I can't stop thinking about it. The series' art and animation translate spectacularly to the isometric battlefield, bursting with character and SNK's trademark style. Series veterans like Eri, Fio, and Marco will have to work together to take out opposing infantry, tanks, and hopefully a returning Martian force. **BY JOHN CARSON**

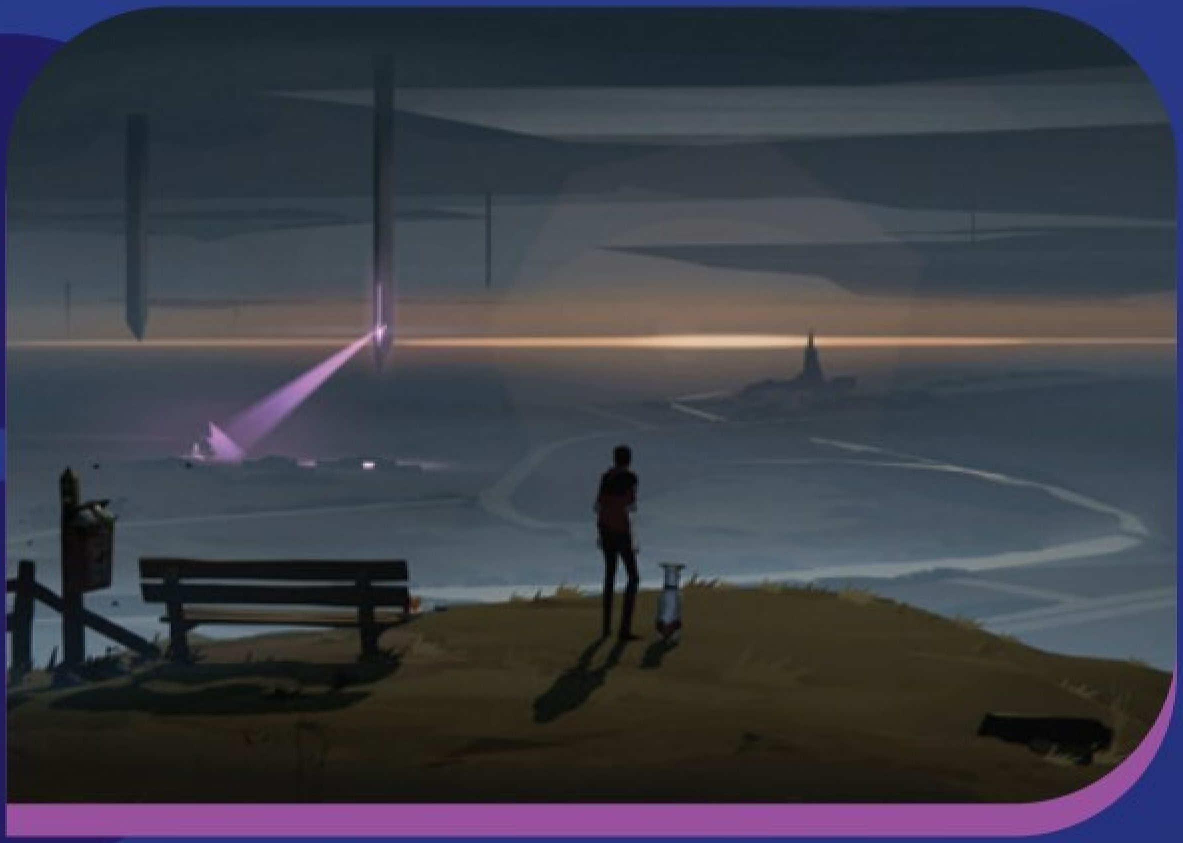




TUNIC

Tunic's March 16 release date is just around the corner. After spending hours combing through the game's demos and getting destroyed by the unexpectedly intense combat, I can't wait to start this Zelda-inspired adventure. Tunic's gorgeous aesthetics and buttery feel have me champing at the bit to get my hands on it when it comes to Xbox consoles and PC this spring. **BY JILL GRODT**

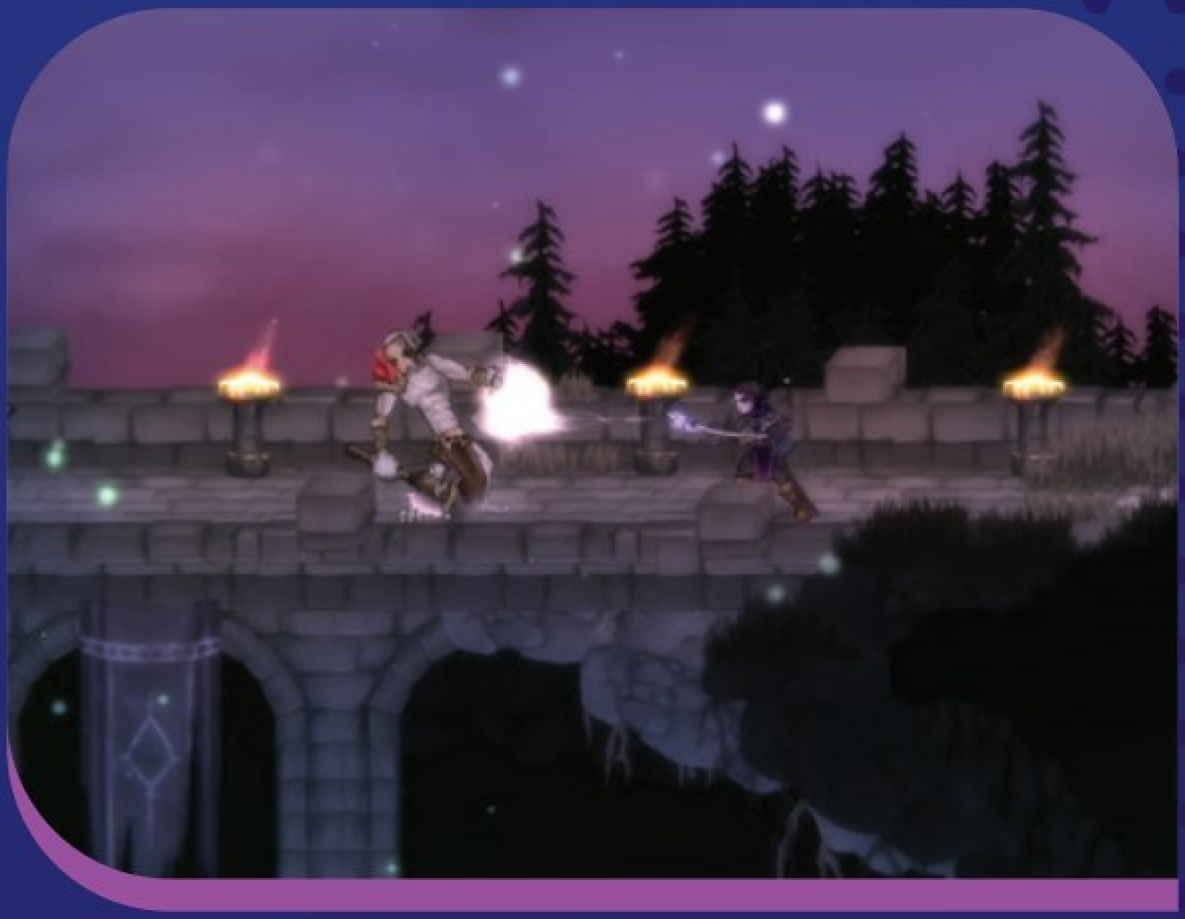
SOMERVILLE



A new Somerville teaser premiered at The Game Awards 2021 showcasing the deeply personal and emotional story at the heart of Jumpship's debut indie. A man escorts his family across an invaded, crumbling Earth, while bipedal machines, floating spires, and other technological wonders patrol the scorched wasteland. Somerville's has no release date, but its four short trailers are more than enough to keep sci-fi fans hooked. **BY JASON GUISAO**

SALT AND SACRIFICE

Salt and Sanctuary was a delightful 2D take on the Soulslike formula, so I can't wait to see what Ska Studios is doing for its second foray into bleak realms, big swords, and bigger bosses. In Salt and Sacrifice, we're poised to become the scourge of all mages, roaming to hunt down the most dangerous magi in the land. Salt and Sacrifice is coming to PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, and PC in 2022. **BY DANIEL TACK**



MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

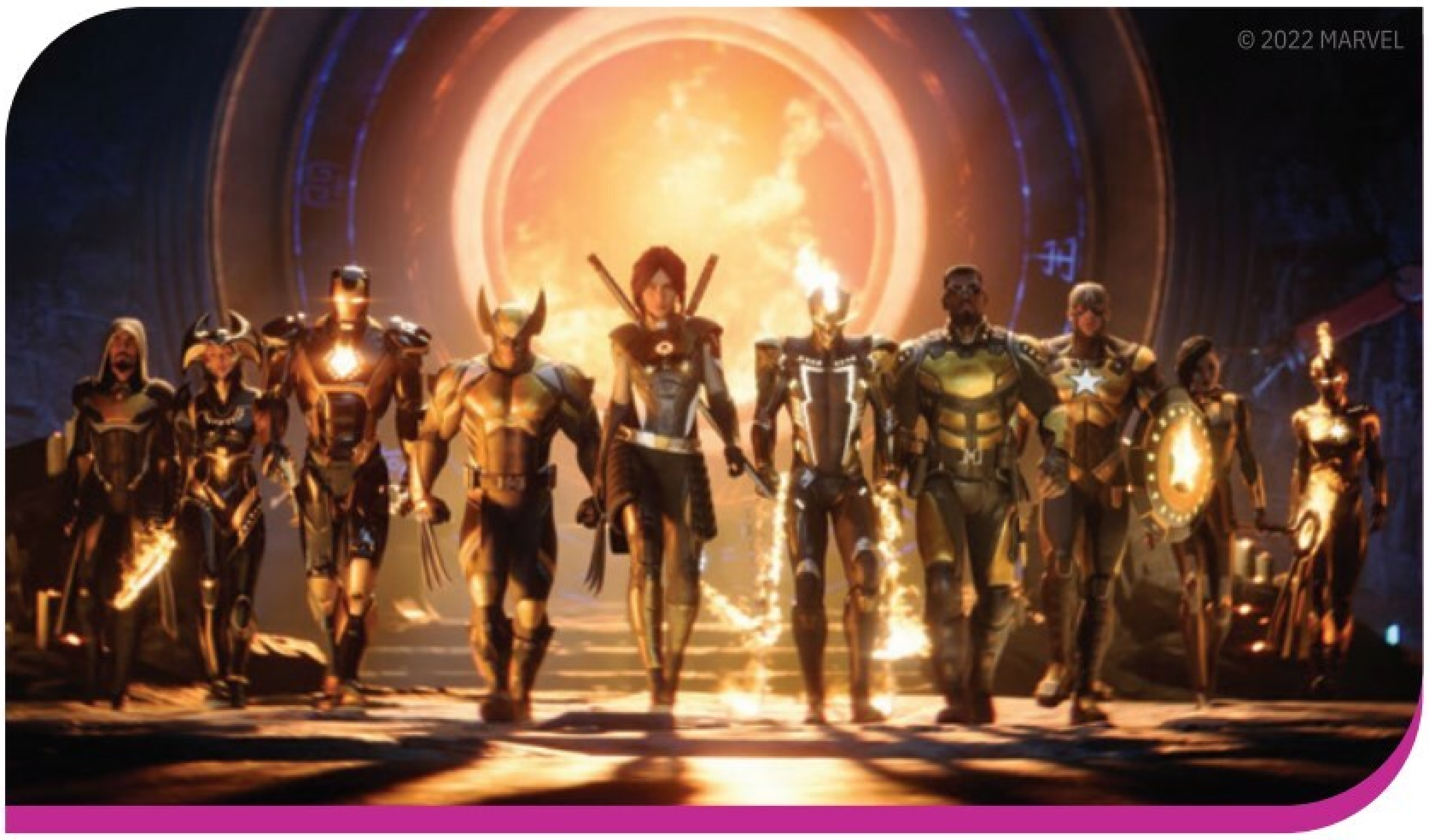
The fate of the world lies in the cards

If you were to tell someone that Firaxis Games is making a Marvel game, there's a good chance they'd immediately picture XCOM with Marvel heroes. However, Firaxis is straying from the obvious choice and developing a card-based strategy RPG. Of course, you'll have Iron Man and Captain America on your team, a given in today's Marvel environment. But you'll also find Ghost Rider, Blade, and others at your disposal, providing the occult feel you'd expect in a classic Midnight Suns team-up.

While you aren't button-mashing your way to victory as you might in other superhero team-ups, you still use heroic moves. Wolverine has his claws, Cap's shield will be hurtling toward enemies, and Iron Man's blasters change will to still make that iconic charge-up sound, but all of those actions are dictated by what cards you used. Throughout the story, you make decisions that affect character dynamics and relationships, and build a deck of trusty cards to take down monstrous minions and Earth-threatening bosses alike.

It's this card-based take on the traditional superhero action that has me so excited about Midnight Suns. As more and more third-person action-adventure superhero games arrive, it's refreshing that Marvel is willing to take a risk as big as this. I only hope it pays off. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** 2K Games **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games **RELEASE** 2022



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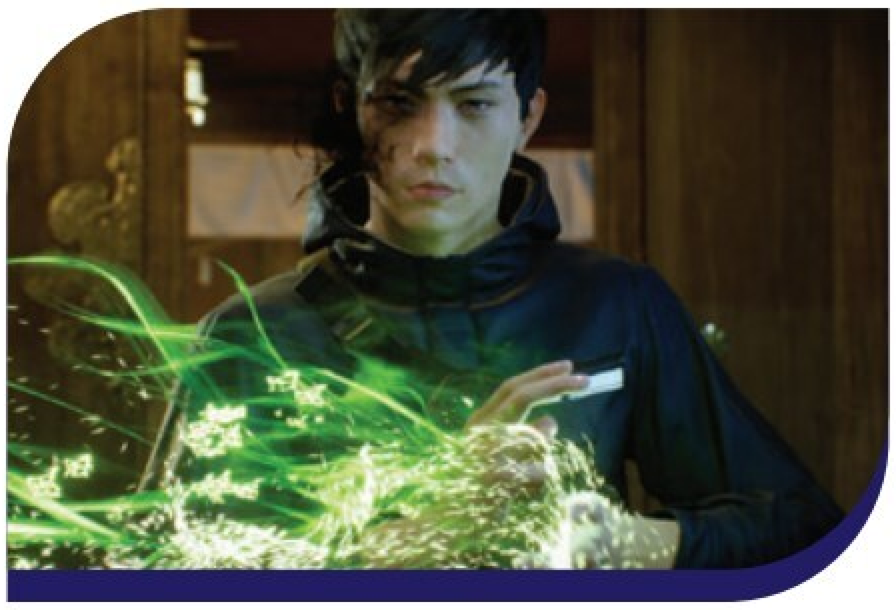
GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

Calling all creeps

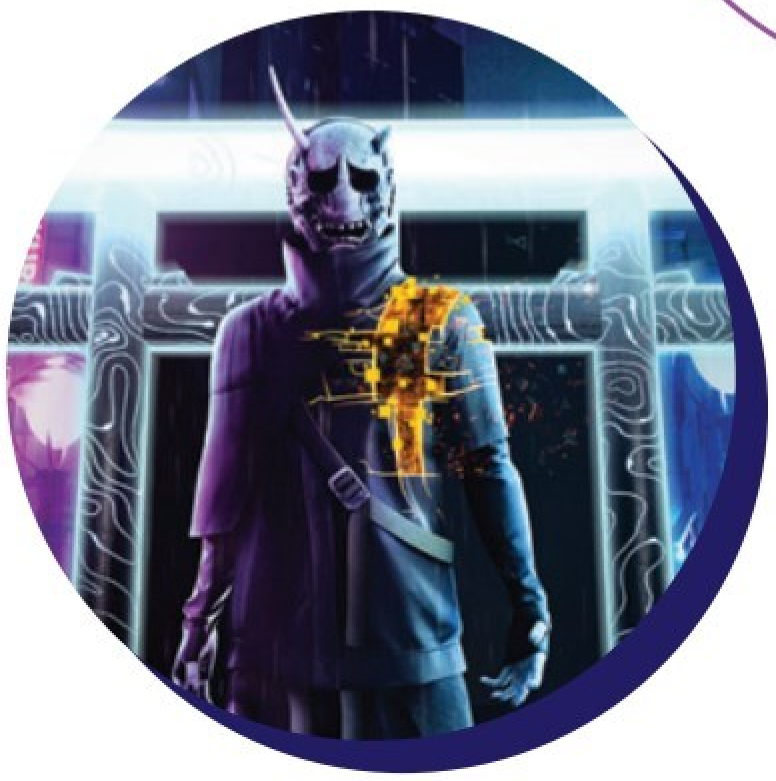
There aren't enough games that make you ask, "What the heck am I looking at?" In fact, in recent years, only one comes to mind: Ghostwire: Tokyo.

Despite its viral announcement – which also introduced us to former director Ikumi Nakamura, who is now somewhat of a video game celebrity – we didn't know much about Ghostwire after first hearing about it at E3 2019. Its most recent trailer hasn't helped much, either.



Here's what I've surmised: you play as some guy abandoned in Tokyo's Shibuya district. Inexplicably, you have powers. There's a hammy bad guy who wears a creepy mask. And most importantly, Tokyo is chock-full of weirdo monsters.

This is what has me most excited for Ghostwire. I know nothing about it other than the info above. The monsters in the trailer, ostensibly inspired by Japanese folklore and the "J-horror" film boom of the late '90s and early 2000s (think *Ring* and *Ju-On: The Grudge*), juxtaposed against the dense, high-tech, and vibrant backdrop of modern Tokyo, looks fascinating. And creepy. That's important, too. There's something so unsettling about paranormal creatures walking city streets. I love it.



Ghostwire is expected to come out this spring. I'm excited to dive in blind, to see what nastiness waits for me in the back allies and main thoroughfares of Tokyo. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Tango Gameworks **RELEASE** 2022

OVERWATCH 2

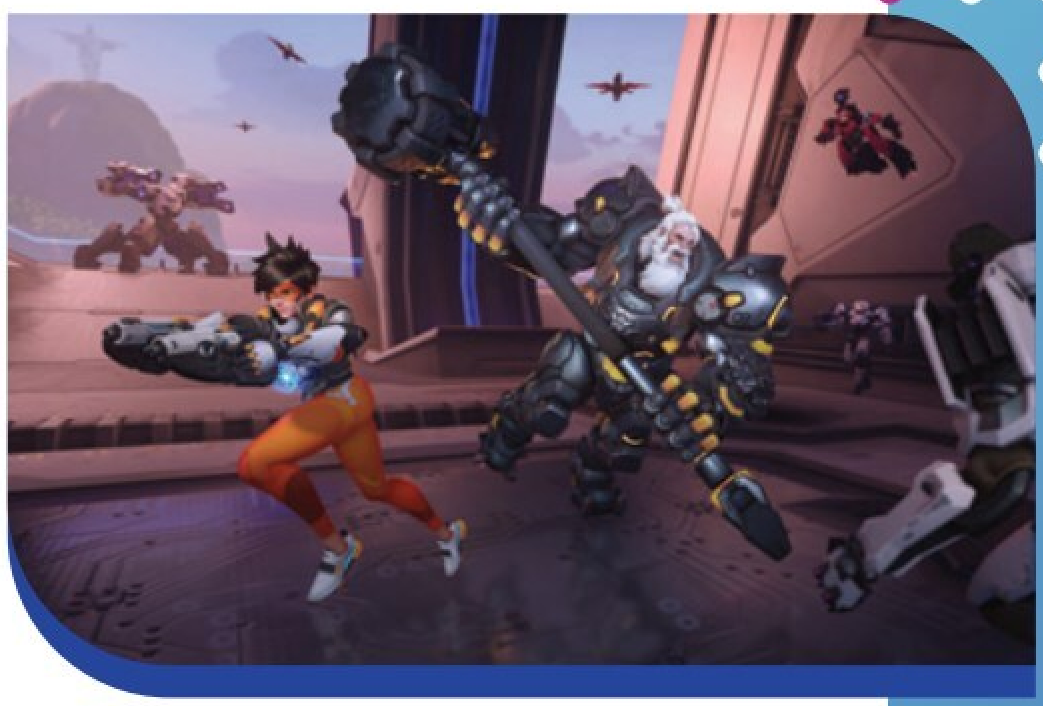
Fighting the odds

When Overwatch debuted in 2016, it dazzled with its colorful cast, creative powers, and engaging team play combined with competitive thrills. But the fun has started to fizzle, with sporadic updates that don't keep players logging in. Overwatch 2 is the chance for a big comeback, but it has some steep hills to climb to attain that coveted victory screen.

Overwatch 2 hasn't had an easy time getting off the ground. Its initial messaging confused fans about whether it was a true sequel or more of an expansion. The game has had several leadership changes over the course of development, including the surprising departure of mastermind and face of the franchise, Jeff Kaplan. Not to mention Activision Blizzard has been embroiled in a lawsuit over reported toxic workplace culture.

Things may look bleak, and delays have been inevitable. But the original Overwatch was truly something special, and I'm hoping it can be that again, with some much-needed new lifeblood. The team seems aware of the stakes, taking this opportunity to expand Overwatch 2's initial scope, going as far as to call it: "The dawn of a new Overwatch."

Overwatch 2 primarily focuses on cooperative PvE story missions, something fans have clamored for. It also changes the competitive gameplay to 5v5, with each team having only one tank. To compensate, tanks will play more aggressively and be less of wall protection. Heroes have also been reworked, like rightfully taking away Mei's ability to freeze enemies in place. All the aforementioned changes alongside new heroes, maps, and modes should shake up the game, and hopefully, catch our attention once again. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**



PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 10-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment
DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment **RELEASE** TBA

MULTIVERSUS

Warner Property Bros.

It's hard not to compare what Warner Bros. Games and developer Player First Games are cooking up with MultiVersus to what Nintendo has achieved in its influential Super Smash Bros. over the years. Warner has proven in the movie space that it's not afraid to mash together IP for the sake of entertainment like in *Ready Player One* or *Space Jam: A New Legacy*.

Now WB is primed to do the same in the realm of video games. Sure, it may not make sense on paper to have Batman teaming with a magical creature named Reindog to do battle against Shaggy Rogers and Steven Universe, but the idea alone sparks some excitement in my brain.

Yet another mascot-packed fighter isn't what intrigues me about MultiVersus. Like Nintendo's efforts, it's more the near-omnipotent potential of its roster, which could range from superheroes to wizards to metal goliaths. I have the feeling we've only seen the tip of that iceberg. Likewise, the focus on 2v2 matches and class/role structures for each combatant is rather enticing and may bring some much-needed innovation to the somewhat formulaic platform fighting template. Not to mention with its cross-platform F2P model, I could have my MultiVersus collection ready at a moment's notice to start some fun, friendly competition anywhere.

BY JOHN CARSON

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Fighting (1 to 4-Players Online) **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games **DEVELOPER** Player First Games **RELEASE** 2022

BAYONETTA 3

Return of the queen

We need more games like Bayonetta. Not in terms of its gameplay; there are a lot of stylish action games – though arguably, none feel as good as the Bayonetta series. What I mean is, we need more games that revel in their own fun. Games that are irreverent, confident, and dumb – but in a self-aware way.

The Bayonetta series has long had a great sense of humor. Bayonetta herself is a fantastic character who blends her sexuality and humor seamlessly, often at the expense of those around her. Platinum's patented whacky situations – presented in many of its series, such as The Wonderful 101 – are always at their best and biggest in the Bayonetta series. I can't wait to start wrapping my mind around its new combos and weapons, but more so, I'm hungry for a game that's fun.

Bayonetta 3 appears to be more Bayonetta. This is quite literally the only thing I want. When I think about Bayonetta 3, I get most excited about all the weird and unexpected places it might take me. It doesn't hurt that the series has long had some of the best gameplay in the game industry, but it's the surrounding package that has me looking forward to revisiting my favorite witch.

BY BLAKE HESTER

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Platinum Games **RELEASE** 2022

TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS

D&D with guns

Tiny Tina's not-so-subtle nods to Dungeons & Dragons created some of the Borderlands series' most memorable moments, so it's no wonder that the team at Gearbox zeroed in on the character's wild fantasy stylings for a spin-off. Tiny Tina's Wonderlands takes cues from the successful co-op shooting action of the Borderlands adventures, but adds a healthy dose of bombastic fantasy monsters and magic to the mix.

A closer look at some of the available classes has increased my enthusiasm for the impending release. The Clawbringer is an armored warrior wielding a massive mechanized hammer, which can be flung at foes to inflict lightning damage or smashed into the ground to create a burning zone of fire. Rounding out the damage-dealing, the Clawbringer also travels with their own personal wyvern pet that can breathe fire. Meanwhile, the Spellshot mixes spells and guns to inflict damage, including the ability to polymorph opponents. These two join the previously detailed Stabbomancer and Brr-Zerkers, whose names pretty much tell you what you need to know.

One of the signs of a great class-based game is if it's hard to decide which playable character you want to try first. I'm still trying to make up my mind as we steer toward launch in just a few weeks.

BY MATT MILLER

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER 2K Games **DEVELOPER** Gearbox Software **RELEASE** March 25

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SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

Come personal hell or high water

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice was an oppressive yet eerily beautiful psychological horror game about the sacrifices one person makes to save the soul of her lover. It was also a more budget game, compared to others in the same genre, and in some ways, it showed. Its combat grew stale quickly, and its puzzles occasionally brought pacing to a halt. However, thanks to a 2018 acquisition, developer Ninja Theory now has access to Microsoft money, and this could solve the problems that kept Hellblade from being truly great.

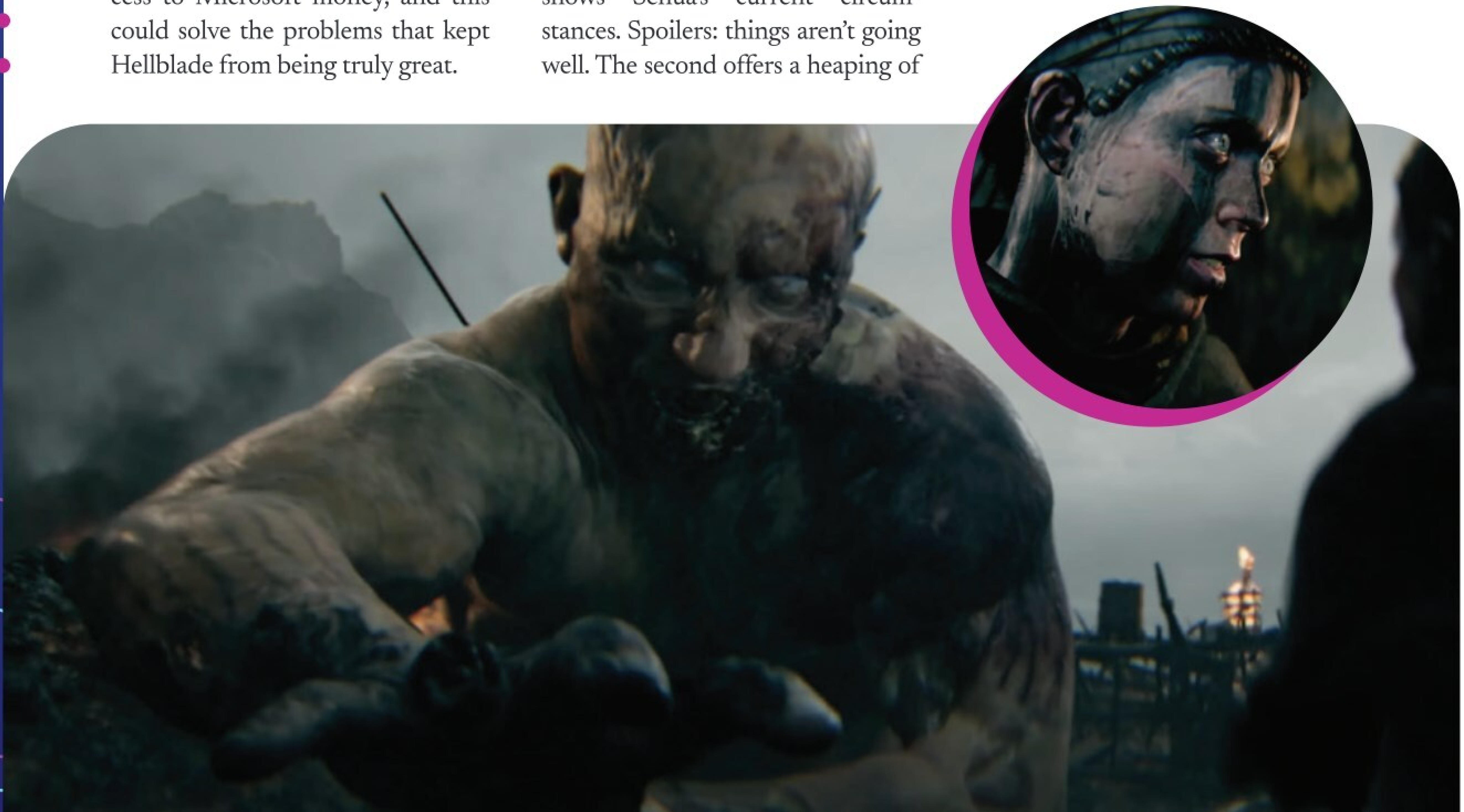
Senua's Saga: Hellblade II seems primed to deliver on all that made its predecessor an exciting, albeit flawed, foundation: stunning visuals, horrific cult-like imagery, and a story with heart. While nobody has publicly gone hands-on with the sequel, Ninja Theory has released two of the most metal trailers for a video game yet.

The first is completely cinematic but sets the tone of Senua's Saga perfectly – it's dark, ritualistic, and shows Senua's current circumstances. Spoilers: things aren't going well. The second offers a heaping of gameplay and showcases some more of the dark imagery we expect out of Hellblade. It also highlights how fluid the gameplay of Senua's Saga is.

If these two trailers are a taste of what to expect, then we can't wait to dive into Senua's mind.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action-Adventure
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Ninja Theory **RELEASE** TBA



MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

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After meeting in Insomniac's first Spider-Man game, Peter Parker and Miles Morales seem to be in top form in Marvel's Spider-Man 2. The two take down baddies with ease in the trailer, but a more sinister presence looms as Venom emerges from the shadows to challenge the web-slinging duo. I can't wait to see the Spidey/Symbiote showdown on PS5 in 2023. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

MARVEL'S WOLVERINE

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Wolverine is the star of Insomniac's next Marvel game. While we've only seen a teaser trailer, we got hints of what this violent adventure might have in store, including a license plate teasing *The Incredible Hulk* #181 (Wolverine's first appearance) and Princess Bar in Madripoor. I'm looking forward to firing this game up on my PS5, though it might not be until 2023 or later. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

SPLATOON 3

The frenzied and fresh third-person shooting franchise from Nintendo returns to Switch this year. Featuring new weapons and items, plus a new hub known as the Splatlands, Splatoon 3 looks to build upon the first two titles in several ways. On top of the beloved multiplayer suite, players can also complete a new single-player story mode called "Return of the Mammalians." **BY BRIAN SHEA**

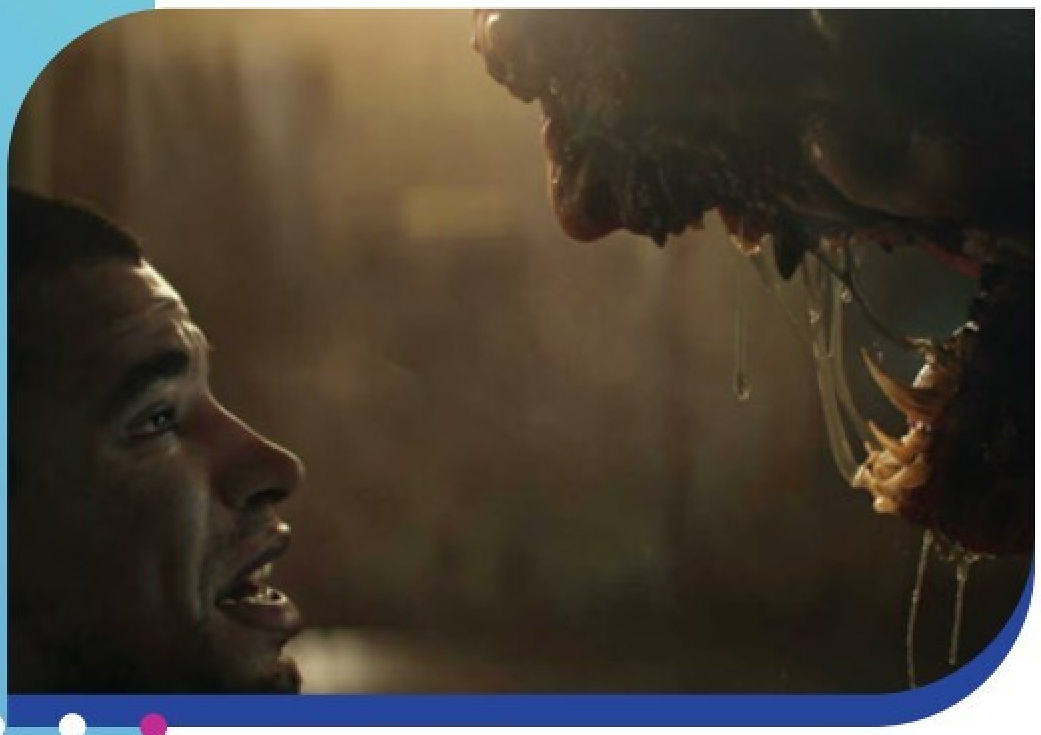
TRIANGLE STRATEGY

While we still want another entry in the Final Fantasy Tactics franchise, Triangle Strategy may satiate that strategy RPG appetite. With turn-based combat and grid action, maneuvering your units into the right position to strike is critical. In addition, Triangle Strategy includes some massive politicking on a world stage where your decisions influence the outcome of a greater war, characters in your team, and more. Triangle Strategy is coming to Nintendo Switch on March 4. **BY DANIEL TACK**

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

A horrific prison break

It's a good time to be a Dead Space fan. EA is currently remaking the original game, and we're getting The Callisto Protocol, a new sci-fi horror game by Striking Distance Studios, a team helmed by Dead Space creator Glen Schofield.



Since its unveiling during 2020's The Game Awards, I've been hungry for any terrifying nugget on the title, but details remain scarce. A gruesome cinematic trailer sets the stage for what Striking Distance describes as a single-player survival horror adventure set on Jupiter's moon, Callisto, in 2320. Players must escape the confines of a maximum-security prison occupied by a menacing alien creature, at least if the reveal trailer is any indication.

Whether or not it's a single monster or a horde of them is unclear. Still, one fascinating tidbit is that The Callisto Protocol occupies the same universe as PUBG (as both games share the same publisher), albeit hundreds of years in the future.

Though that made me raise an eyebrow at first, I'm relieved to hear any direct connections between the two games will be negligible at best.

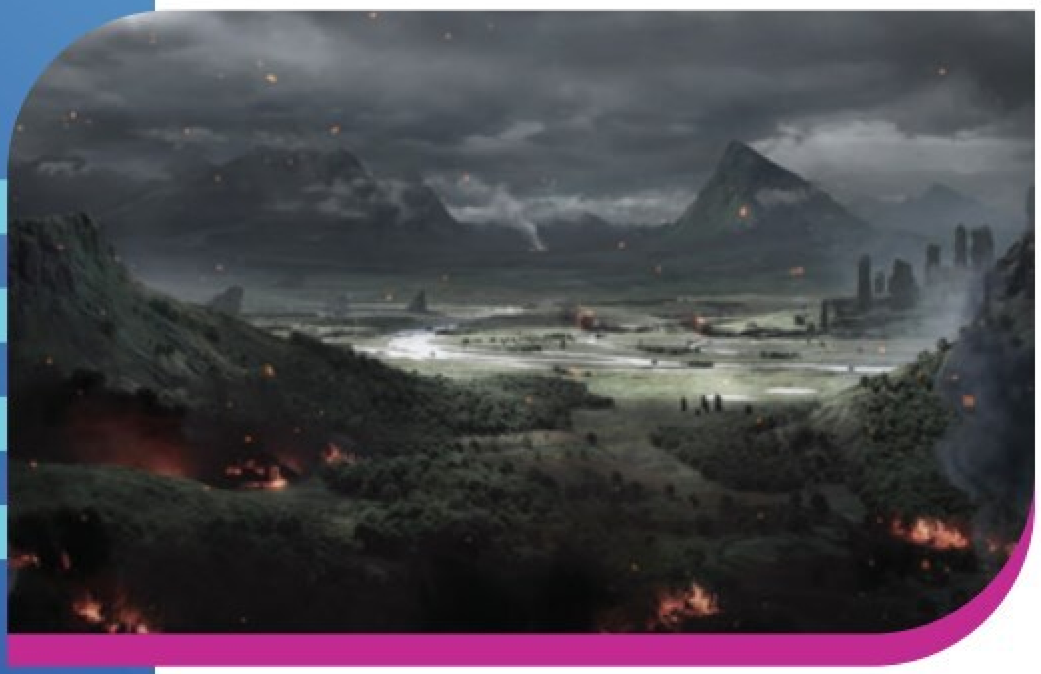
Though I'm itching to see gameplay, the idea of The Callisto Protocol and the pedigree of Striking Distance has me drooling over the possibilities. 2022 should, with any luck, be the year we get a closer look at the game and, hopefully, a release date. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Krafton
DEVELOPER Striking Distance Studios
RELEASE 2022

AVOWED

Pillars in a new perspective

Point blank; there's not a lot known about Avowed yet. Obsidian and Microsoft have been relatively tight-lipped on the project since its announcement at the Xbox Games Showcase in July 2020. At first glance, it's easy to make comparisons to Bethesda's Skyrim. That's fair, since Obsidian previously developed Fallout spinoff New Vegas, so why wouldn't the team take on an Elder Scrolls now that both companies are under the Microsoft banner?



However, instead of going that route, Avowed – a first-person, open-world RPG – takes place in Eora, the fictional world of Obsidian's Pillars of Eternity. The footage we've seen so far also gives away very little, but is evocative, nonetheless. It shows a volley of arrows flying through a cloud-ridden sky going into a cavern. Here, the camera settles into the perspective of a rune-drawing and blade-wielding combatant, awaiting a confrontation with a fiery fiend in the distance.

Despite a history of technical maladies in Obsidian's more ambitious projects, its reputation for excellent writing and world-building makes Avowed instantly intriguing. The Outer Worlds is the most recent example of how the studio can build fascinating locales and narrative webs, albeit in a sci-fi setting. Still, it gives me plenty of hope the characters and world of Eora can flourish in this fresh first-person perspective.

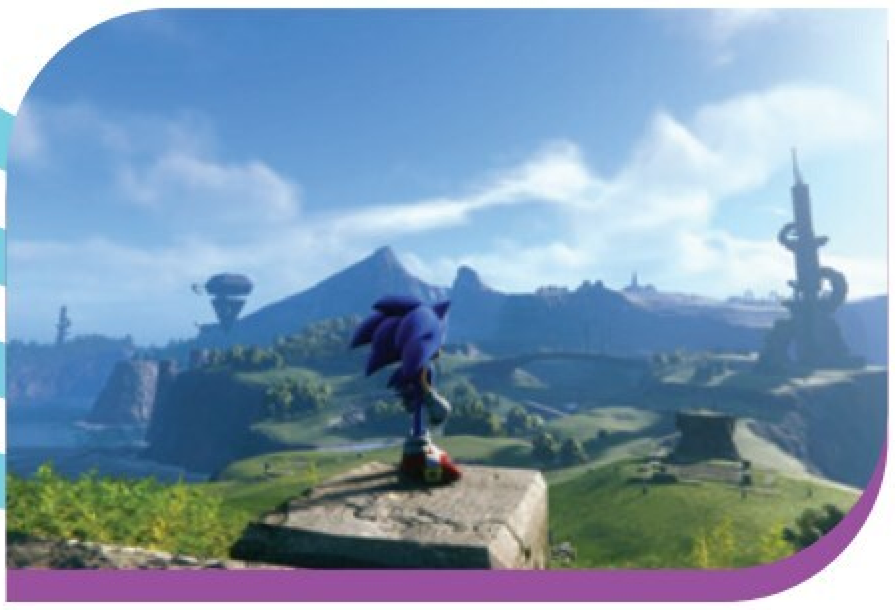
BY JOHN CARSON

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player
Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Obsidian Entertainment
RELEASE TBA

SONIC FRONTIERS

A true escape from the city

The Sonic Central 30th anniversary stream last May gave us announcements of projects like last year's Sonic Colors: Ultimate and an upcoming 2022 classic compilation called Sonic Origins. However, the most intriguing reveal teased the next mainline game from Sonic Team.



That game, Sonic Frontiers, was finally revealed during The Game Awards 2021. Described as "open-zone inspired," Frontiers immediately recalls The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild through its vast world, ancient architectural designs reclaimed by nature, and even the trailer's piano flourishes.

The Starfall Islands play host to forests, waterfalls, deserts, and other biomes players have grown accustomed to both in open-world games and the Sonic franchise. Frontiers' story was penned by acclaimed writer Ian Flynn, who has written the well-liked *Sonic the Hedgehog* comics since 2006. This fan-pleasing move gives many hope the story will do a better job capturing the characters' tone than other recent games.

The trailer we saw only featured a combination of CG sequences and in-game flyovers with small teases of what the narrative could hold. Sonic Team promises more information in the coming months, but for now, Sonic Frontiers looks to be one of the series' more promising games in decades.

BY BRIAN SHEA

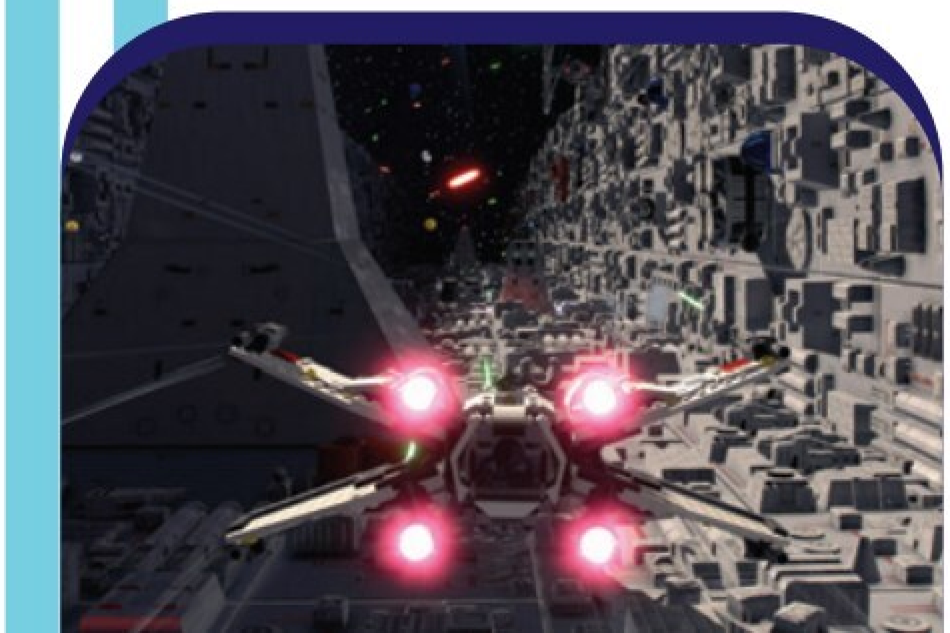
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Sonic Team Japan **RELEASE** Late 2022

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

The wait is almost over

Delayed more than a year, Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga is now slated to release on April 5. Developer TT Games says this will be the biggest Lego Star Wars game to date, and the long development cycle is finally nearing the end stages.

At a glance, The Skywalker Saga may look like every other Lego Star Wars game, but the gameplay is dramatically different, as is the way players journey through the content. If you want to relive all nine of the Skywalker films sequentially, you have that opportunity. However, with the ability to travel to any planet at any time, you can journey through these stories out of order, and even meet Rey before you spend a second with Han Solo.



TT Games is veering away from linear level designs to give players freedom of exploration in all areas of play. Before traveling to a planet, you'll get the chance to pilot your own starship in deep space. When you finally decide to descend to a planet's surface, you determine what spaceport you want to land at, as most planets are open-play areas–each offering different objectives, story moments, and secrets galore.

Smashing up objects into studs that can potentially be rearranged as other things is still the backbone of gameplay, and TT Games is hoping combat will be just as satisfying as breaking stuff. A new over-the-shoulder third-person camera perspective enhances the gunplay with aim-down-sights capabilities, and melee is now combo-based with light and heavy strikes.

The Skywalker Saga features over 300 playable characters and over 800 more to interact with. Following release, TT Games is releasing additional character packs, one of which appears to focus on *The Mandalorian*. **BY ANDREW REINER** ■

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games **DEVELOPER** TT Games **RELEASE** April 5

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RAINBOW SIX EXTRACTION

A strange encounter

Rainbow Six Extraction is a spin-off of Ubisoft's flagship competitive multiplayer hit, Rainbow Six Siege, set in an alien-infested depiction of the United States. This three-player cooperative shooter borrows its predecessor's roster of operators and weapons and recontextualizes them inside a more approachable player-versus-environment setting – often with enjoyable results. The operator advancements offer exciting rewards for players willing to invest the time, though the climb to unlock the best rewards is steep. Additionally, a persistent health system creates meaningful consequences for players who fail to best Extraction's many challenges by carrying over operators' injuries from match to match. However, Rainbow Six Siege casts a substantial shadow, and despite its best efforts, Ubisoft's latest shooter struggles to fully emerge from beneath it.

Extraction is technically well-crafted. It's polished and enjoyable. But I don't find it nearly as compelling as the shooter it spins off from. Even during the most exciting scenarios, I couldn't help but wish I was playing Rainbow Six Siege. Each incursion in Extraction begins like a match in Siege. Your team picks their operators and equipment load-outs and then prepares to fight an onslaught of A.I. enemies across four brand new locations: New York City, San Francisco, Alaska, or Truth or Consequences – which is a real city in New Mexico. These maps are divided into multiple sub-maps that offer ample cover and verticality, though none of them are particularly memorable outside of a few exceptions. More interesting locations, like a UFO-themed diorama or an abandoned casino, are covered in parasite nests and dark slime textures, making them difficult to memorize.

You and your crew complete a random selection of goals in each area. These range from stealth-based challenges like Biopsy, which requires you to obtain alien tissue samples with a knife, to attack-oriented objectives like Hunt and Decontamination, which serve as standard-fare kill quests that remain somewhat satisfying. Siege fans may recognize missions like Sabotage and Rescue, which mirror the Bomb and Hostage modes featured in Siege. My favorite objective type is Specimen, which requires your team to lure one of the powerful Archaeans – the parasitic antagonists tormenting the darkened hallways of every environment – into a trap to capture it alive. This objective is hilarious, and my teammates and I often laughed as one unlucky person had to serve as bait.

Airlocks separate each city's three sub-maps, serving as safehouses filled with supplies like med-kits and (hopefully) ammunition. The deeper your squad ventures into the incursion, the harder it is to successfully extract as enemies increase in difficulty and variety, ranging from low-level grunts to terrifying behemoths capable of smashing through walls. I enjoy the variety, but you'll have to increase the difficulty level to encounter the best ones. If you manage to fight your way through all three areas, you earn extra experience points, unlocking perks like increased movement speed or new abilities like Sledge's charged hammer swing. These operator advancements are the highlight of Extraction's progression loop, and I wanted to keep playing to obtain them. You also receive new operators, equipment, and cosmetics through advancing your player level by completing matches and level-specific challenges. While there are exciting rewards to unlock, and I appreciate the operator-specific upgrades in particular, progression feels unnecessarily slow overall.

Every weapon handles differently, but I enjoyed using them all equally. Silenced rifles are my go-to weapon type. They trade raw stopping power for the ability to execute discrete kill-shots on all kinds of Archaeans. Shotguns reliably blow enemies – and walls – to pieces but attract lots of attention. Extraction also introduces stealth takedowns, offering a discrete method to complete your objectives when ammo and health are scarce. Nothing feels better than quietly clearing a perimeter with your team. However, the game fails to adequately convey when you're at risk of being detected, so my attempts at subtlety often devolved into panicked shoot-outs.

While Extraction borrows a lot from Siege, it introduces a new feature I love: persistent operator health. Suppose you previously played as Vigil and exited the mission with low health. In that case, he'll start the next game injured unless you let him recover by completing incursions as other characters. Depending on your performance, several operators could have an injured status, or even worse, be missing in action until you rescue them during another mission. This system encouraged me to experiment with operators across the roster, resulting in white-knuckle encounters.

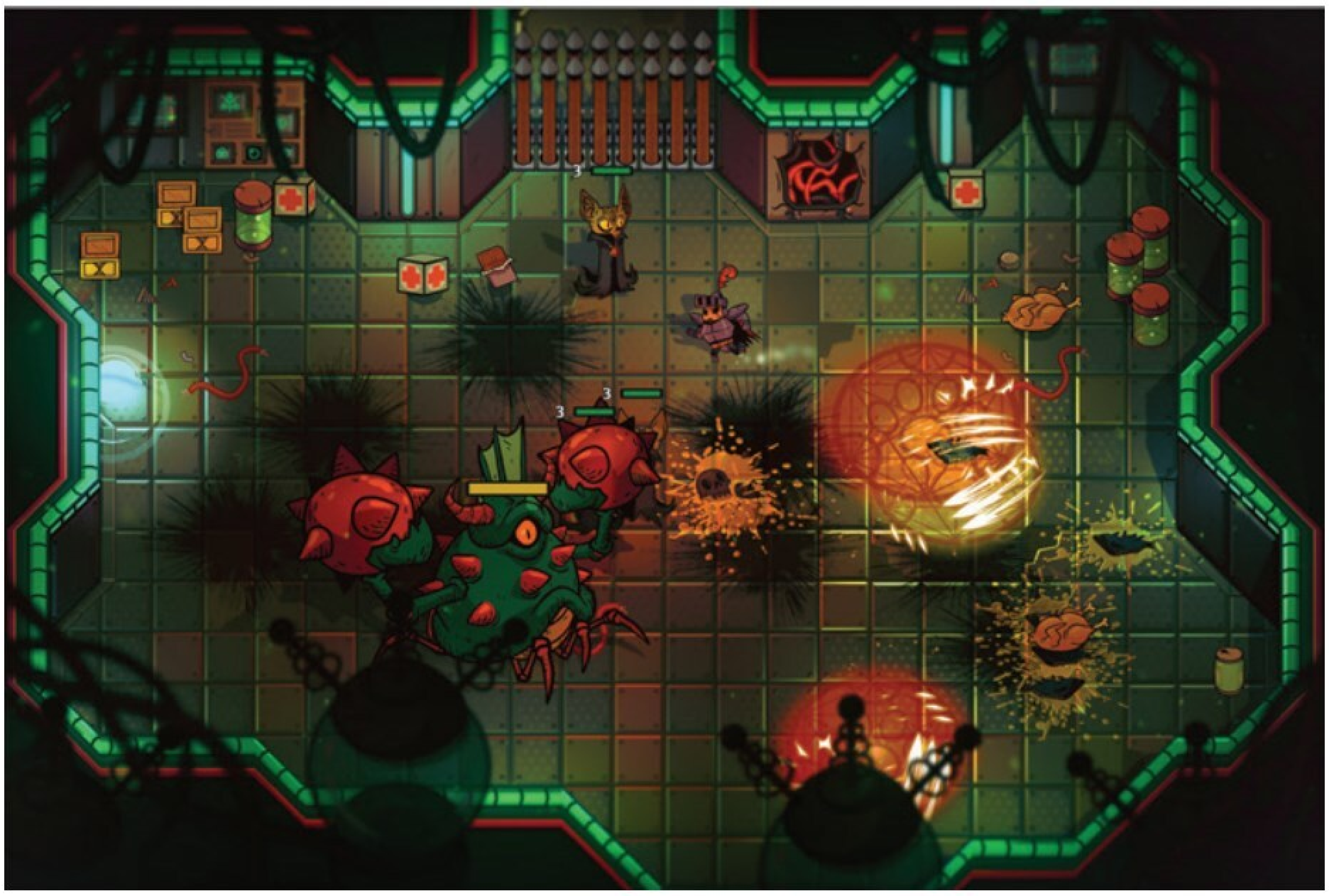
Rainbow Six Extraction converts much of Siege's content library into an approachable co-op shooter, providing a tense environment for players of all skill levels. However, in a series of industry-defining hits, this installment feels incredibly safe and markedly less gripping than its predecessor. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

7.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Stadia • Luna • PC
STYLE 3-Player Online Shooter **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montreal
RELEASE January 20 **RATING** M

NOBODY SAVES THE WORLD

Form and function



Nobody Saves the World is as charming and funny as Drinkbox Studios' Guacamelee series. Bolstered by wonderfully challenging dungeons, Nobody's core pillars of body swapping and ability customization go a long way to making this a memorable adventure. However, a paper-thin world and underwhelming rewards keep this Nobody from being the best Somebody possible.

Within the amusing story, only one wizard has the power to shut down the disgusting fungal calamity that's devastating the kingdom. Unfortunately, that guy is nowhere to be found. Instead, a pale, featureless wimp takes up that mage's powerful wand. With it, this Nobody can shapeshift into useful forms like a bodybuilder, robot, or rat; each equipped with a special attack and passive ability, with more to be unlocked. I found leveling up forms and gaining new ones to be a blast. Completing skin-specific challenges levels up that form, revealing more to unlock and becoming available as certain ranks are achieved.

Nobody Saves the World's progression hinges on the constant loop of completing these quests. Every quest grants precious experience along with stars, a currency used only to unlock the five legendary dungeons. Unfortunately, those rewards are the same for any side missions I picked up from NPCs, making most quests feel like just another drop in the XP bucket. While constantly filling progress bars feeds a primal dopamine drip, I wish there were additional passive abilities or stat boosts as rewards to some of these activities. However, those are relegated to unsatisfying gold sinks from vendors.

Nobody's top-down, hack-and-slash gameplay reminds me of an amalgamation of a classic 2D The Legend of Zelda and The Binding of Isaac. Some character forms at Nobody's disposal wield more traditional weapons like swords and bows, while others use streams of lightning, tears from a slug, or a swift kick from a horse. It's not afraid to tread well into goofy and mildly disturbing territory. Abilities from any form can be slotted in to be used by another, enabling an enjoyably deep system of mixing skills to mold the perfect dungeon slaying creature. I love how many quests rely on equipping non-native abilities. It forces me to switch up my strategy, sometimes at the cost of combat effectiveness, though it always teaches me a neat combo to use down the road. One of my favorite concoctions involves the Magician, who already swarms baddies with rabbits and tigers, and equipping him with an attack that infects enemies who join my army as zombies upon death.

The most fun and challenging action unfolds within the dungeons. These castles, beached sea creatures, UFOs, and corporate office buildings each house a few floors of monsters to slay. However, there's a catch–every dungeon sports a dangerous modifier, which often upsets my preferred loadout. You'll usually need to build something special to clear them. For instance, one dungeon modifies damage from any attack to deal 9,999. Puzzling out solutions to survive through trial and error is fun since I have the right tools at my disposal; I just have to find which ones to use. The various modifiers make me appreciate the breadth of customization and experimentation for every form. Figuring out which build will work best is incredibly satisfying.

The world outside the dungeons, while beautifully drawn and visually diverse, lacks an exploratory pulse. The overworld rarely provides the same complexity or challenge I enjoy in the dungeons, save for a couple of guild quests scattered about. The world feels flat and uninteresting as a result. Traversal only gets as deep as using certain forms to swim through bodies of water or fit into some tight corridors. The excellent Jim Guthrie soundtrack does make everything more bearable, though.

Despite its minor shortcomings, Nobody Saves the World is enthralling from start to finish as I level my way through form ranks for the next body or ability. It's most fun when unleashing devious yet approachable combat scenarios, keeping me on my toes to find the best solution to survive. Thankfully, it gives me plenty of those unrelenting loops throughout, justifying the time to save this funny little world. **BY JOHN CARSON**

8.25

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Drinkbox Studios **DEVELOPER** Drinkbox Studios
RELEASE January 18 **RATING** T

GI
MUST PLAY

FINAL FANTASY XIV: ENDWALKER

A grand finale

Following a reboot and three exceptional expansions, Final Fantasy XIV's fourth add-on, Endwalker, has a lot to live up to, especially as it's billed as the conclusion to the storyline that's been brewing since the defunct 1.0 release. I'm happy to report Endwalker masterfully delivers a dense narrative full of exciting twists, wonderful character moments, and well-designed battles. Its culmination offers a satisfying conclusion to the conflict between deities Hydaelyn and Zodiark and other threads that have been unfolding for well over a decade.

Endwalker not only reminisces on its prior expansions, but revels in nostalgia for previous Final Fantasy games that mold its memorable scenarios and incredible soundtrack. Dungeon bosses like the Magus sisters, and a fateful trip to the moon, harken back to Final Fantasy IV. While more recent additions like the tortured FF X summon Anima get a spotlight elsewhere. Those with knowledge of the Final Fantasy series will enjoy various throwbacks, but you'll definitely want to go into Endwalker with a good understanding of XIV's story thus far.

The action in this expansion is slow to start, with much of the opening hours filled with cutscenes as you run from quest giver to destination in typical MMO fashion. But once the narrative setup is done, the excitement rarely stops until the credits roll. You'll travel to the nation of scholars for a diplomatic mission in Old Sharlayan, the colorful, Indian-inspired Radz-at-han and Thavanir, and even to the moon and beyond. Each environment is key to the evolving story centered around a world-ending cataclysm.

I'm impressed by the story's dark tones and how it smartly handles complicated themes. The initial visit to enemy territory in Garlemald stands out, as it deals with neglected, malnourished, and distrusting communities wrapped in a civil war as you, an invading force, attempt to assist them. Another questline about the loyalties of soldiers sworn to a nation that's crumbling around them also made a big impact. Despair and hopelessness are central to much of the expansion's plot and manifest in surprising ways.

Endwalker pulls off a spectacular ending to a complicated ongoing narrative, a testament to how far it has come since its revival in A Realm Reborn. Luckily this isn't the end, but the beginning of a new story that I can't wait to experience in future patches and expansions. Having spent hundreds of hours with Final Fantasy XIV, it's easily one of the best MMO experiences out there, and Endwalker has solidified it as my favorite Final Fantasy to date. **BY JOHN CARSON**

9.25

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** Online Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix **RELEASE** December 7 **RATING** T

WINDJAMMERS 2

A fading adrenaline rush

Windjammers pits two players against each other in an over-the-top frisbee version of air hockey. You shoot the disc at each other, attempting to nail it through your opponent's goal; you can also earn points if the disc touches the ground on their court, as in tennis. Getting the disc past your adversary involves executing a variety of wildly implausible shots that ricochet off walls or wrap around the court in flaming loop-the-loops.

The title possesses a fighting-game level of depth despite its simple veneer, so I wish it had a more fleshed-out tutorial. Windjammers 2 has a lot of moves and nuance that the tutorial mode plainly explains through static slides. Committing pages of button commands to memory before starting a match is neither fun nor effective, and there's no way to access the move list in the pause menu.

The basic arcade, online, and versus modes didn't engage me for the long haul. And there is a noticeable lack of unlockable rewards, characters, or cosmetics. I respect this old-school approach as an older player, but I found it hard to stay motivated when all I could expect from winning a grueling round was a pat on the back and a "good job!"

Windjammers 2 is an enjoyable throwback that proves its unique sport is still a blast, but the thrill is fleeting. I'm happy to see it return; I just wish it gave me more reasons to step on its court. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

6.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
Stadia • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Sports **PUBLISHER** Dotemu
DEVELOPER Dotemu **RELEASE** January 20 **RATING** E

GTFO

The gunplay leaves a lot to be desired as the catalog of assault rifles, SMGs, pistols, and shotguns feel the same, but stealth runs are satisfying to plan out with others. Guttural screeches of enemies are bloodcurdling during engagements, while dark and complicated backdrops limit sightlines and keep me on my toes. GTFO isn't for the faint of heart. **BY JASON GUISAO**

8

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Online Shooter **PUBLISHER** 10 Chambers Collective
DEVELOPER 10 Chambers Collective **RELEASE** December 9 **RATING** M

THE GUNK

In a game filled with alien worlds splashed with color and populated with extraterrestrial mysteries, The Gunk falls surprisingly flat. Fortunately, this spacecraft manages to stay aloft with likable characters, solid gameplay, and a serviceable story. **BY JILL GRODT**

7

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Thunderful Publishing
DEVELOPER Image & Form Games, Thunderful Development **RELEASE** December 16 **RATING** T

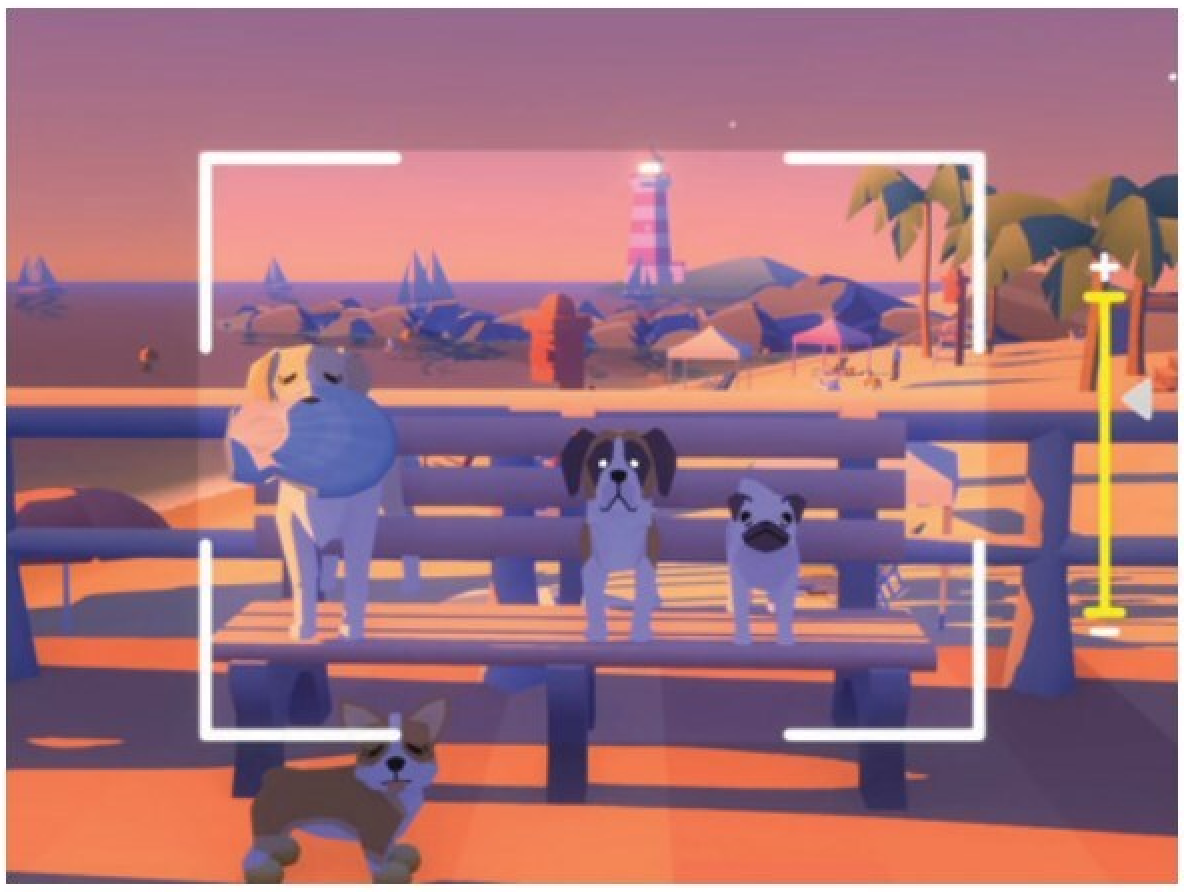
RUINED KING: A LEAGUE OF LEGENDS STORY

Skill-based progression, explorable hubs, and turn-based combat might immediately excite fans of developer Airship Syndicate's debut project, Battle Chasers: Nightwar. However, Ruined King's implementation of these features is often mediocre. Nevertheless, the total package is an adequate single-player alternative to Riot's multiplayer-centric titles. **BY JASON GUISAO**

7

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Riot Games
DEVELOPER Airship Syndicate **RELEASE** November 16 **RATING** T

PUPPERAZZI



My brief time with the game was stuffed with lighthearted amusement, marred only slightly by a few annoyances. Its animated levels, playful attitude, and pleasing premise make Pupperazzi a wonderful game to jump into when you just want to escape and play with pretend puppies for a while. **BY JILL GRODT**

7.25

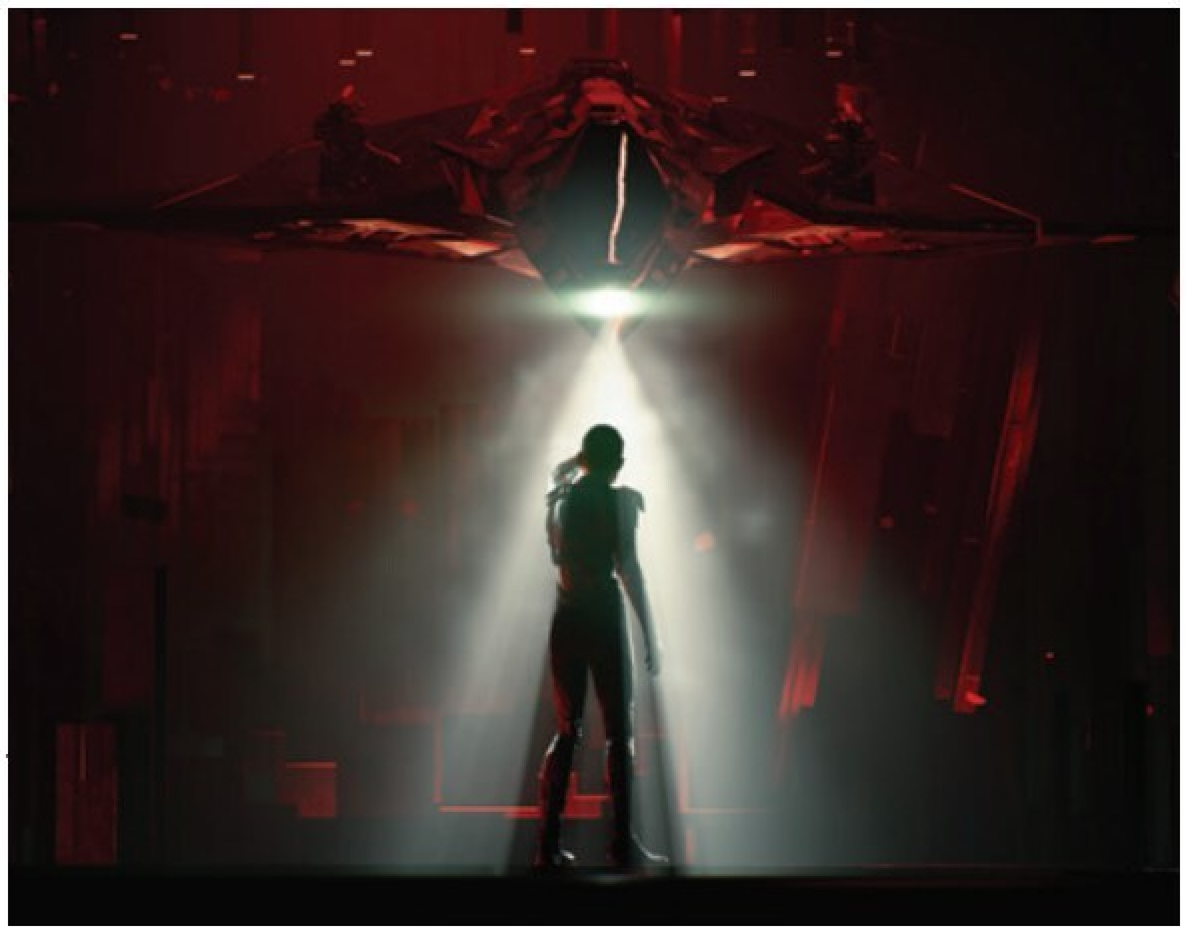
PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Kitfox Games **DEVELOPER** Sundae Month **RELEASE** January 20 **RATING** E

CHORUS

Sci-fi space combat shooters are a niche genre today, so while I'm thankful Chorus exists, much of the game is a relatively linear and mundane slog, punctuated by a few epic encounters here and there that live up to a galactic fantasy. **BY DANIEL TACK** ■

7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • Stadia • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Deep Silver Fishlabs
RELEASE December 3 **RATING** T



RETROSPECTIVE

INSIDE THE NINTENDO POWER HOTLINE

Millions of calls later, we take a fly-on-the-wall look at what it was like to be a Nintendo gameplay counselor

BY BLAKE HESTER

Kyle Hudson didn't know what Nintendo was. But it was 1988, he was just back from boot camp, and he needed a job. His friend, Jeff Palmer, suggested they both go work for Nintendo. Palmer's cousin Cliff worked there as a gameplay counselor; he got paid to play video games all day. Hudson and Palmer could do that, too, the latter said.

"Jeff sold it to me like, 'Hey, we're gonna sit in a cubicle and play games all day and answer phone calls,'" Hudson recalls. "And I was like, 'Hell yeah.'"

In 1987, Nintendo launched its Nintendo Power Hotline. If a player encountered problems beating a video game, they could call the hotline and get advice from what Nintendo called a gameplay counselor. It was effectively a call center. It was also so much more than that.

→
Image:
Laleh Azarshin

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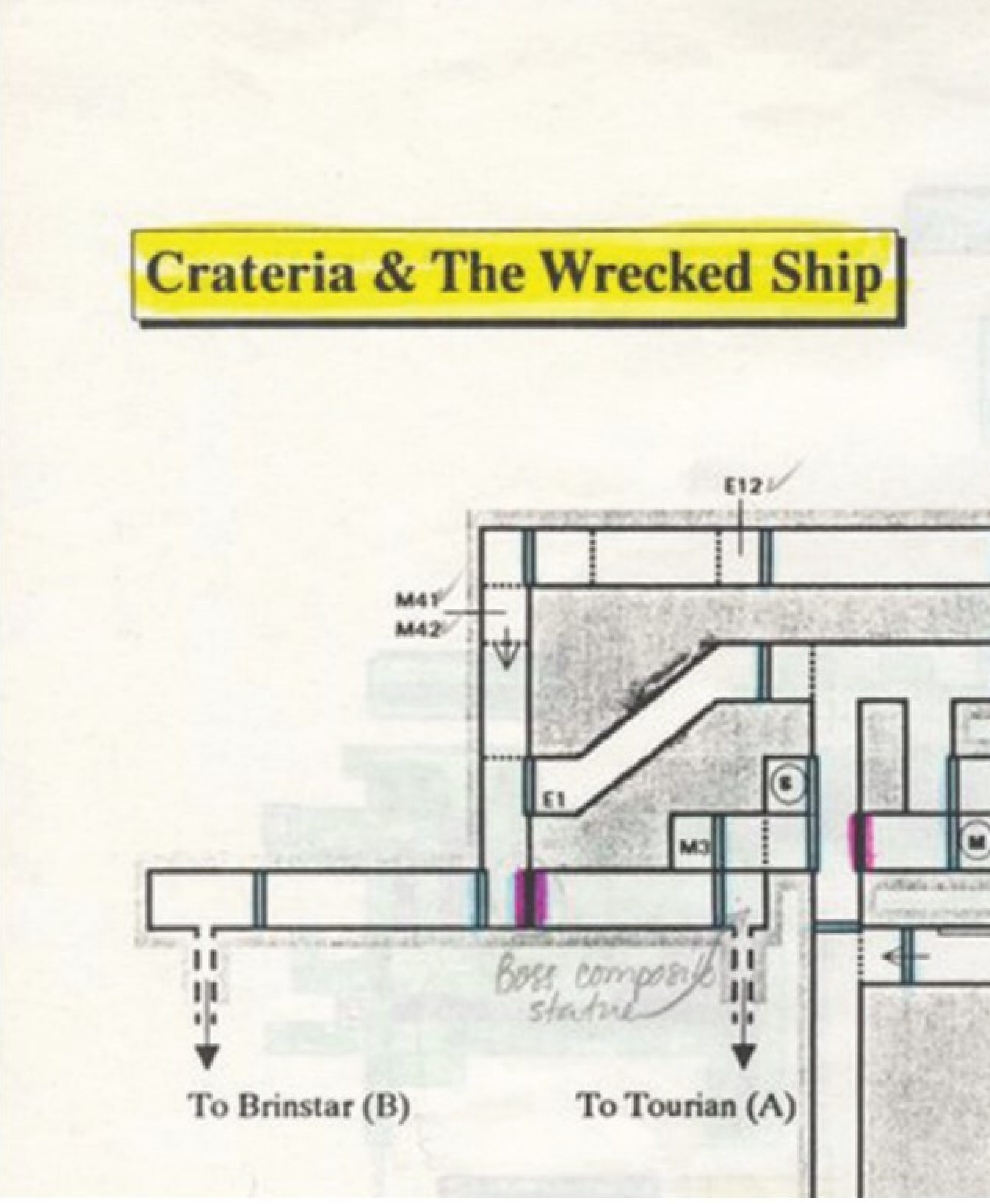
By the time Nintendo shut the hotline down in 2005, gameplay counselors had helped millions. It became a part of video game history, fondly remembered decades later by children that called. For some kids, gameplay counselors were heroes; they were literally people who got paid to play video games all day. For others, counselors were the first people in their lives to talk seriously with them about games. For many counselors themselves, the call center launched their careers – both within and outside of Nintendo. Despite not knowing what Nintendo was in 1988 when he applied, Hudson stayed with the company until 2012. More than two decades after taking his first call, he had worked his way up to Nintendo's product testing manager.

To get an idea of what it was like to work at the Nintendo Power Hotline, we recently spoke with 12 people. Talking to a wide variety of former counselors and people that called the Hotline growing up, we got a fly-on-the-wall look at what it was like to be part of this point in Nintendo's history. We also learned a lot about Nintendo of America's culture in the '80s and '90s, spearheaded by its former president, Minoru Arakawa.



Hand-drawn map for Super Metroid that GPCs would use to help callers

Image: Stephan Reese/ Art of Nintendo Power

The Best Job in the World

Nintendo wasn't picky about who could be a gameplay counselor. In the earliest stages, all a person needed was to show up at one of the many temp agencies employed to fill seats and complete an application. If the temp agency called back, the first interview was breezy.

"It was basically, 'Can you work this shift?' 'Do you have reliable transportation?' Just basic stuff," Hudson says. "'Are you breathing? Are you warm-blooded? Okay.'"

It was when people got to Nintendo that the process intensified. The company billed gameplay counselors as video game experts. If you had a problem with a game, the professional gamers in Nintendo's Redmond, Wash. office could help you – no matter how complicated or niche the issue may be.

While Nintendo didn't require any of its counselors to actually enjoy games, once a person made it past the initial temp interview, it did require a weeks-long training process. New employees had to play through games, learn about their various chokepoints and secrets, and take a massive test before they could field calls.

"Instead of just answering one very simple question about Legend of Zelda, maybe you have to list all of the treasures in all of the dungeons in both quests," says former counselor Caesar Filori. "How do you get to the minus world in Mario? How many coins do you need for an extra life? They just wanted to make sure you actually knew the games inside and out, and the mechanics and how to beat the bosses."

"But I'll be honest with you. Myself, and a lot of people at that time, we cheated through the test," Hudson admits. "Because I was like, 'There's no way I'm gonna remember all this s---.'"

After a short shadow period, where new counselors would sit in while an experienced counselor took calls, they finally got on the phones. Calls were immediate and plentiful.

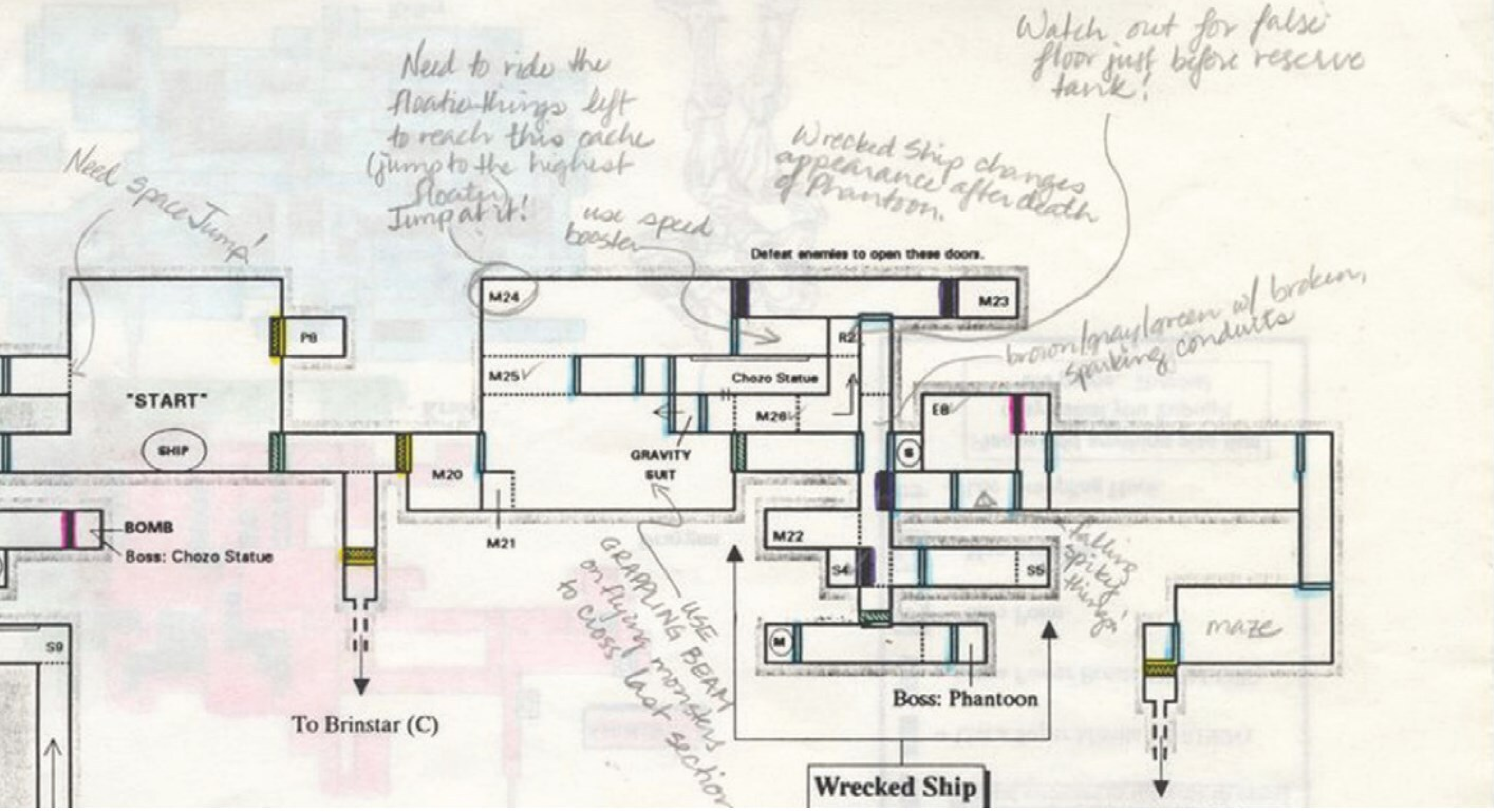
It's hard to nail down exactly how many calls a counselor would get on a given day, though most approximations land around 100 per shift. At its height, the call center had a couple hundred people taking calls for just under 24 hours a day. If each person is taking around 100 calls per day, in total, the call center was receiving thousands of calls every day it was in operation. Sam Hosier III, who worked there between '94 and '97, says at one point Nintendo gave out a shirt "that said we had done 28 million calls."

Of course, this number was exacerbated by the holiday season, when people across the country were getting new Nintendo games and consoles. The counselors dubbed this "Hell Week."

"When we had our full call center, they put up these telecaster boards that showed you how many calls were in-queue," former counselor Yvette Kirby Waters says about Hell Week. "We called it the 'Hellecaster' because you could feel the pressure when 100, 200 calls are in-queue – 300, you know? And there were over 100 people in the call center taking calls one after another – boom, boom, boom. And yet, the queue list is still in the hundreds."

Even though Nintendo required a certain level of memorization and expertise, it was understood gameplay counselors couldn't know everything every one of those millions of callers inquired about. To help with tough calls, each counselor had a large green binder full of notes, hand-drawn maps, and solutions. Get good enough

QUICK TAKE
Before we could download everything, Nintendo would send us games to review and preview. They didn't arrive in the mail, however. They were handed to us by a game counselor, who had to sit with the game as long as we played. For a long game like The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, the counselor would be in our office for a week.
– ANDREW REINER


Need Space Jump!
Need to ride the floatie-things left to reach this cache (jump to the highest floater) Jump at it!
use speed booster
Wrecked Ship changes appearance after death of Phantoon.
Watch out for false floor just before reserve tank!
Defeat enemies to open these doors.
M24
M23
P8
R2
M25
Chozo Statue
brown/gray/green w/ broken, sparking conduits
"START"
M26
E8
SHIP
GRAVITY SUIT
S
M20
M21
BOMB
Boss: Chozo Statue
USE GRAPPLING BEAM on flying monsters to cross last section
M22
S4
S5
falling spiky things!
maze
S9
M
Boss: Phantoon
To Brinstar (C)
Wrecked Ship

at passive conversation, and a caller on the other end of the line would never know a counselor was quickly flipping through pages, trying to find an answer. To them, it might seem like this person is the all-knowing gamer Nintendo was pitching them as in its then-monthly magazine *Nintendo Power*. In each issue, individual counselors were highlighted in the "Counselors' Corner," featuring tidbits such as their highest game score and favorite Nintendo games, letting callers put faces to the voices on the Nintendo Power Hotline.

Despite the sheer number of calls, as every counselor we talked to tells it, after long enough working the phones, you start to identify the most common questions across Nintendo's most popular games. They may have taken over a hundred calls a day, but most of those calls were about the same two or three games. Work there long enough, and you can spend a lot of your day on autopilot.

"Once you heard the question, the response coming out of your mouth, you really didn't have to think about it," Hudson says.

This left gameplay counselors a lot of time to play video games on the clock – somewhat making good on the dream kids had that these were people who got paid to play games all day. In the Nintendo office was an ever-growing library with every single game the company had released up to that point. "There were no gaps in the collection," Hosier says.

Counselors could check out various titles, and their desks even had TVs and consoles where they could play games while taking calls.

"One of the risks that you have doing that is if you're someone who emotes when you die when you play a game, that can become problematic," Filori says, adding employees got good at muting the call. "I don't remember who it was, but I do know for fact a time where somebody got the mic button muting reversed, so all the person heard on the other end was profanity."

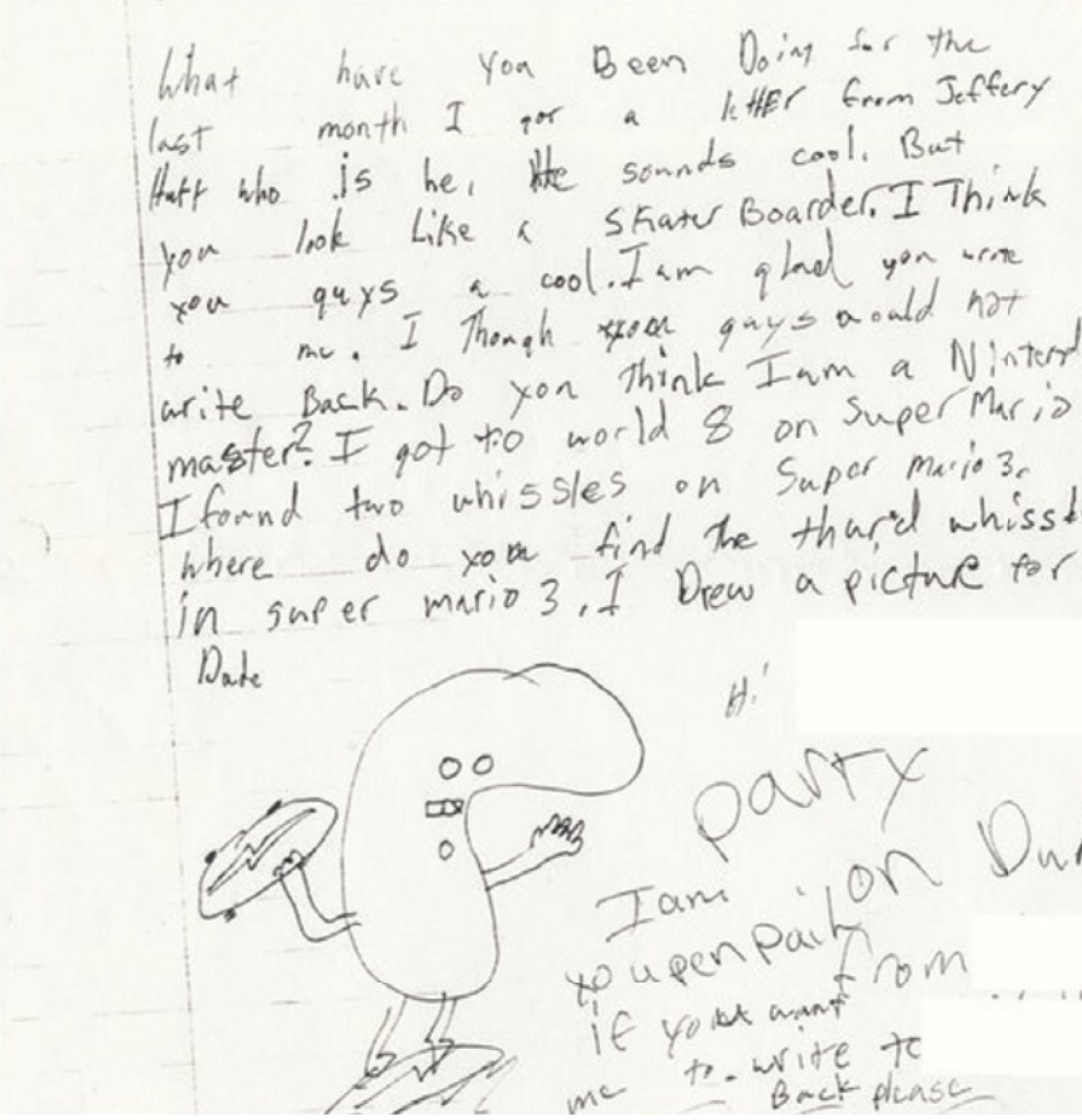
Gaming in the office led to many now-famous pictures. While, ostensibly, letting counselors play games on the clock was so they could stay up-to-date and familiar with all Nintendo's games, these photos worked double-duty as great recruitment tools. Kids could see counselors sitting in an office cubicle, making money and playing games. Who wouldn't think that was cool?

"The concept of gameplay counselors back in the day for a kid obsessed with Nintendo games was kind of this dream job," Phil Theobald, who called the hotline as a kid, says. "In my head, I had this vision of gameplay counselors as, like, the best job in the world."

There were, however, the "nightmare calls." For example, The Goonies, based on the movie of the same name, released by Konami in 1986. As Filori tells it, most of the areas in the game look identical; it was near-impossible to identify where a player was stuck. Same with Legacy of the Wizard. HAL Laboratory's 1989 puzzler Adventures of Lolo was another pain point for gameplay counselors.

"I mean, these are like the Candy Crushes of the time," says former counselor Casey Pelkey about Lolo. "People would call, and they're in, like, the 11th level or something like that. They're like, 'Give me step-by-step.' And we're talking block by block how to do something. It can take forever, and as soon as they do something wrong, it's a reset, right? Let's try it again."

"Lots of people would hang up on those calls," Filori says. "Then, because the supervisors could still hear what you're saying, even once you've wrapped up [since they would monitor calls for quality], they would just keep talking. They'd hang up and keep talking and then say like, 'Um, are you still there? Are you still there? Hello? Hello?'"



What have You Been Doing for the
last month I got a letter from Jeffery
Hatt who is he, He sounds cool. But
you look Like a Skater Boarder. I Think
you guys a cool. I am glad you wrote
to me. I Though you guys would not
write Back. Do you Think I am a Nintend
master? I got to world 8 on Super Mario
I found two whissles on Super mario 3.
where do you find the thurd whiss
in super mario 3, I Drew a picture for [redacted]
Dude

Hi!

party on Du

I am
you pen pal from [redacted]
if you want
me to write to [redacted]
Back please

King of the Castle

Jack Sapperstein was on vacation in St. Thomas Island when he got stuck on a boss in The Final Fantasy Legend, released by Square in 1989. Despite the long-distance charges required to call the Nintendo Power Hotline, Sapperstein, who grew up in New York City, says his parents generally understood when he asked at home to call "the Nintendo people." However, in hindsight, he admits calling from the Caribbean was a bit outrageous.

Sapperstein was one of the millions of kids who bought into Nintendo's marketing around gameplay counselors. He really thought these were all-knowing game fans who could answer every question under the sun without much second thought.

"I just always felt like it was so official, and they were always kind of getting these answers off the top of their heads," he says. "As if I was talking to Mario himself."

And so he called. A lot. Not just for games he was stuck on. Sometimes Sapperstein called with impossible questions – like how to unlock Vega on the Super Nintendo port of Street Fighter II. He wasn't alone. Ben Rico, who grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, called the Hotline numerous times. Rico says he was convinced there was a way to not automatically go down the pipe at the end of world 1-1. He called the gameplay counselors to try and confirm his suspicion.

"I was sitting there, like, 'There's gotta be a way to not automatically get sucked into it,'" Rico says. "Because I was, you know, a f---ing 9-year-old kid. I might have even been 8. The gameplay counselor – very nicely to this little kid – said that 'No, there's no way to do it. You get sucked in; you have to go to the next level.'"

Saperstein and Rico are what gameplay counselors refer to as "regulars." While the Hotline did require long-distance charges for anyone outside of the Redmond area code, that didn't stop people from calling so much that counselors began to remember them – somehow standing out among the thousands of other people they talked to every week. In some cases, these were just people who wanted someone to talk with. In other cases, they were dreaded calls; people counselors hated talking to. But in even more cases, they were just kids, entirely beside themselves with the idea of talking to their heroes – people that worked at Nintendo.

The Nintendo Power Hotline's years of operation coincide exactly with Nintendo's rise in pop-culture prominence and the video game industry's in general. Moreso than ever before, people were playing video games, and here was this entire service built around helping people play their games. While young male children made up a lot of calls, according to those we talked to, people from all walks of life also called the Hotline.

"There were some grandparents who were passionate about this," Waters says. "Maybe they started as a way to play with their grandkids, but they really got into it."

The importance of talking to that many people – and more importantly, that many Nintendo fans – was not lost on founder and then-president of Nintendo of America Minoru Arakawa, who impressed upon counselors that they were providing a service for people who loved Nintendo. Treating them with patience and kindness was paramount. Admittedly, they were also helpful marketing.

"Mr. Arakawa, I remember him conveying to us through the managers that this is how we make this business successful," says Pelkey, who later worked as VP of marketing at the Tetris company, where Arakawa served as president until 2013. "If we don't get people through the games, then they're not going to want to buy the next one."

More so than many executives, people talk about Arakawa with an absolute level of respect and appreciation. A lot of the people we interviewed for this piece were teenagers or young adults when they first joined Nintendo – the call center was their first job, and of course, it was an entry-level one. But Arakawa and his management team were insistent that, should people put the work in, being a gameplay counselor could be a first step towards a career within Nintendo. It didn't matter how low someone was on the totem pole or what department they worked in; there was always room to go up at Arakawa's Nintendo.

"He was a very kind, generous, man," Hudson says. "I mean, what other CEOs knew every single employee's name?"

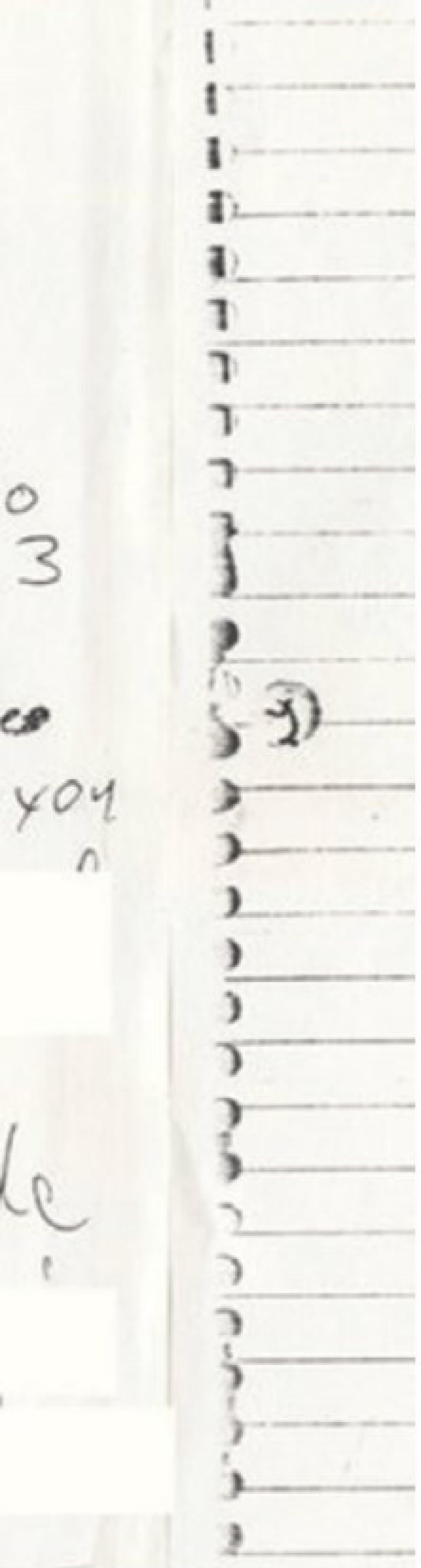
Arguably, however, that generosity did come back to bite Arakawa at least a couple of times.

↘

A fan writes in to the Nintendo Power Hotline.

Opposite: GPC annotations on a map of Super Metroid's Brinstar area

Images: Stephan Reese/ Art of Nintendo Power



For a brief period and in the ’80s and ’90s, Nintendo spared no expense when throwing its annual holiday party. It would rent out entire floors of luxury hotels in downtown Seattle, offer hotel rooms and limo rides to and from for every employee so they wouldn’t need to worry about finding a sober driver, and give them top-shelf food and drink. Nintendo invited every employee – not just its C-suite. Former counselors we talked to describe being in awe of the parties. But for a group made up of many teenage boys and young men in their 20s, things quickly got out of hand once alcohol got involved.

“I do know some stories of people – whose names I can’t remember, and it’s probably good that I don’t – who lost their job after a Christmas party because of inappropriate behavior and apparently actually broke an elevator at the Sheraton in Seattle,” Waters says. “I don’t know how you do that. Maybe they put too many people in the elevator or whatever, but [they] managed to get an elevator stuck.”

“They ended up having to stop doing that,” Hudson says about the holiday parties. “They were destroying these rooms, and Nintendo was hearing about it from the hotels. That only lasted a year or two before they put a kibosh on that, too.”

No one we spoke to for this piece had anything negative to say about the culture of Nintendo or the call center at this time. However, with 30 years of hindsight, Waters does admit the culture probably wouldn’t be acceptable by 2022 standards, likening the call center office to a “college dorm.” It was also majority white and majority male. However, she does point out that her team – the bilingual call center employees, which served Spanish-speaking callers and French Canadians – was largely female.

“In the call center, there was a lot of things probably going on that I would say people would recognize now as inappropriate. But at the time, it was still sort of that fun [thing where] this organization was established by young people,” she says.

“So, you know, there’s some things you look at now and go, ‘Woah,’” Waters adds, laughing.

Hang Up

The Nintendo Power Hotline ran until 2005. It was a major part of Nintendo of America’s day-to-day business. Eventually, the green binders were replaced by a computer system called ELMO, or Electronic Manual Organizer, which streamlined looking up and finding answers. But after a while, technology phased out the need for gameplay counselors. If every walkthrough is easily accessible online – for free – why would you pay to call the Hotline? Especially after it switched to a tolled 900 number from its original Redmond area code number.

But if there’s one thing that stands out and one thing that makes it unique, it’s that it’s remembered at all. There are numerous other call centers in the world, few of which have any longstanding legacy – much less any as fondly remembered as Nintendo’s.

A simple reason for this is the call center focused on fun video games. It also helped that Arakawa required people in the call center to be kind to the people calling in. Beyond that even, he required every single letter sent to Nintendo of America to get a response; there was an entire team within the customer service office dedicated to just answering mail. As far as customer service goes, it was hard to beat Nintendo at this time.

Stephan Reese, who’s dedicated his life to collecting Nintendo ephemera and runs the Art of Nintendo Power education exhibit, describes it succinctly: This was the first time many people had taken their hobby seriously. It was the first time people didn’t talk down to them about liking video games.

“It really was a friend for a lot of these kids,” says Reese, who called the Hotline once when he was around 7. “Specifically, a friend who spoke their language, who knew what they were talking about, who loved games as much as they did, and was able to articulate that back.”

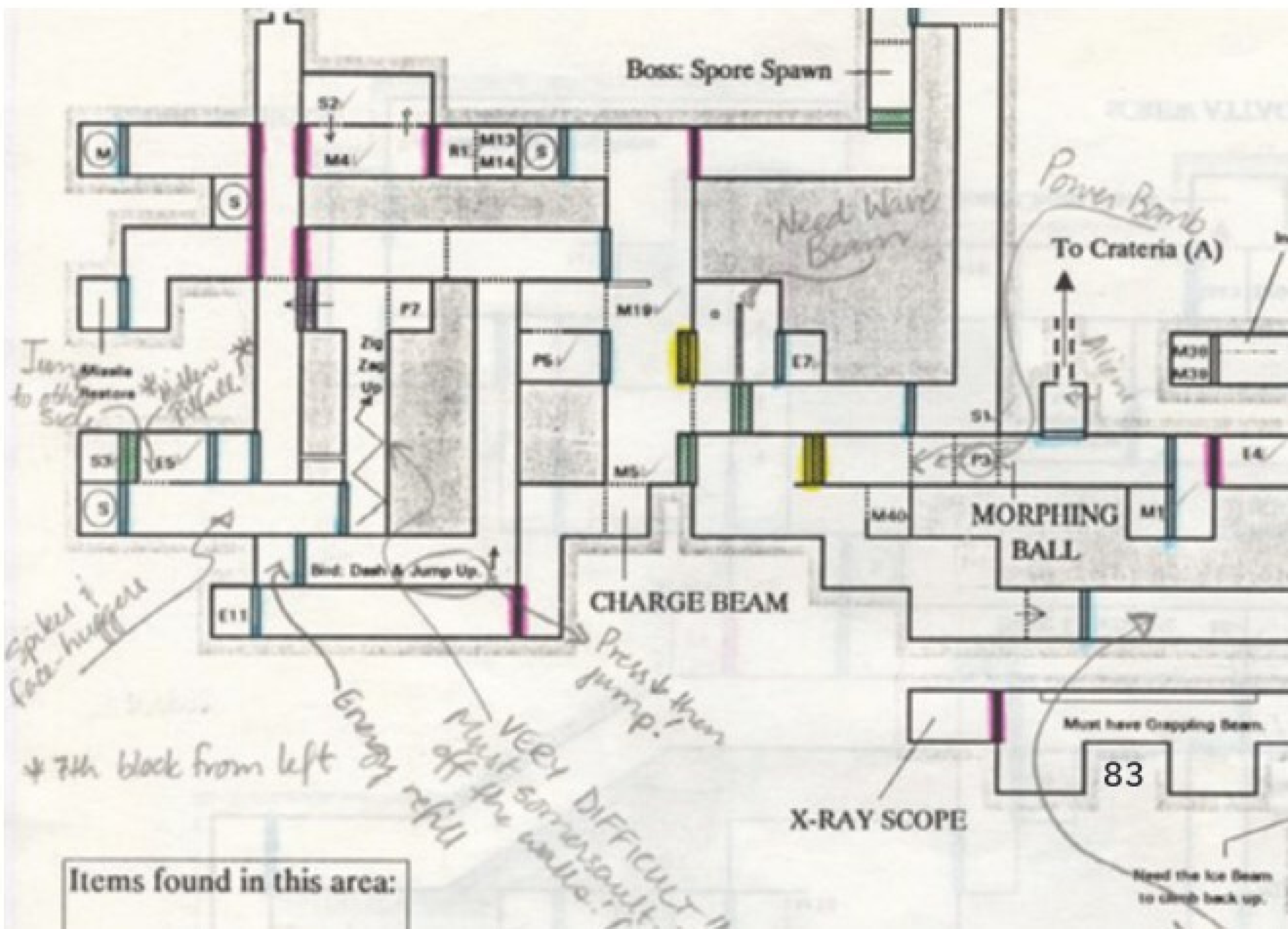
“These were the only adults in my life who were not openly mocking something that I love more than anything,” Reese adds.

The call center was the first step to joining the game industry for the counselors we interviewed. Waters later worked on the Nintendo GameCube software development kit before moving on to a job at Microsoft. She’s now a self-employed contract strategist. Hosier worked as an event production coordinator and assistant manager of trade events at Nintendo before spending time at other tech companies like T-Mobile. After working as a tester for Nintendo, Filori worked for EA, Microsoft, Nike, and Oculus. He’s now a technical programmer at Meta. The list goes on.

But for all of them, it started in that call center.

“Sometimes you hear about something being this golden age, right?” Filori says. “It felt like a golden age at the time. This is different. It’s something new; it’s different; this is a unique thing. I don’t know that it could ever be recreated or replicated to be part of the explosion of video games at the time.”

“It was weird,” he adds. “It was a very weird and unique thing.” ■



ONE LAST THING

FANTASY FANDOM

"YES, I'M A HUGE FAN. Actually, from a while back. Before he became more well known in the fantasy circles with *Game of Thrones*, hitting the series and things like that. I really enjoyed his work such as *Tuf Voyaging* and *Fevre Dream*. Those are a couple of my favorites."

– Hidetaka Miyazaki on Elden Ring worldbuilder George R.R. Martin ■

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